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JESSIE'S EXPIATION.

A Novel.

BY

OSWALD BOYLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :

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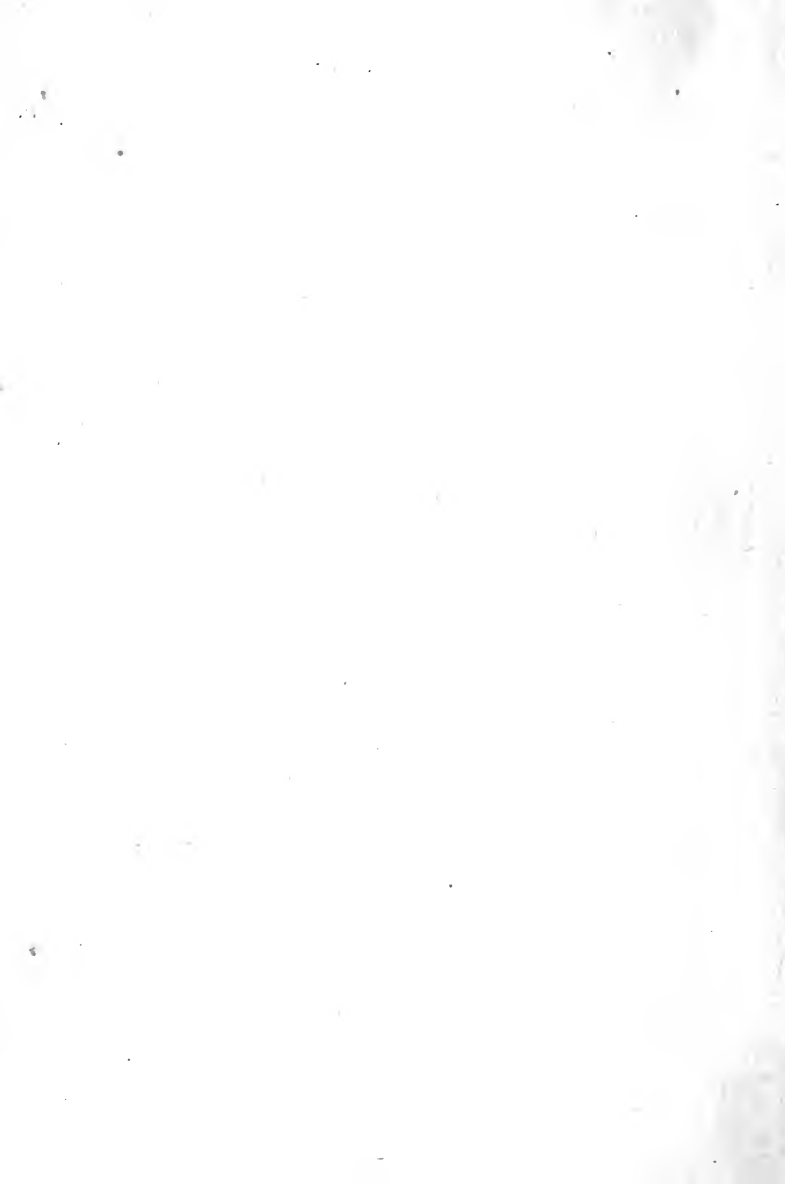
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JESSIE'S EXPIATION.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF A SCHEME.

FLEETWOOD MANSE lies on the borders of two southernly counties, and enjoys the contrasted beauties of each. To the north-east are undulating lands that in autumn wave with yellow corn. To the south-west are wide stretches of glorious woodland. The Manse itself can boast but a vast home park, holding its own in seclusion between these contending glories of English scenery, and the rambling pile which bears the name of the family to which it has immemorially belonged.

But at the hour at which this story opens, neither woodland nor cornfield, nor mansion, could be descried one from the other.

September nights are, ordinarily, clear, even when they are not bright. This one, however, lacked not only the harvest-moon, but was entirely without stars, and matched in utter darkness the mirkiest night of midmost winter. Rain had been falling all the afternoon and evening, and had ceased after twilight only to be succeeded by dense immoveable clouds. Anybody who listened might still have heard the raindrops occasionally dripping from the roof or from the trees; but the acutest ear could have caught no other sound.

Nevertheless, the three or four gentlemen whom Chichester Fleetwood had assembled under his roof for the purpose of enjoying with them the destructive sports of the season, had retired to rest with the unanimous avowal that, despite the rain, they had had a capital day's shooting. A hundred and five brace had fallen to six guns, and in sufficiently equal bags to send each man to bed contented without being vainglorious.

It was getting on fast to an hour and a half after midnight, and one would have supposed that, after the arduous pleasures of the day, the host and his guests would all be deeply sunk in slumber. Young ladies occasionally have a weakness for sitting up of nights when they get to their chamber, and wasting the precious hours intended for repose upon an analysis of their feelings, and setting down the result in scented diaries. Even young men who are not yet quite out of their teens, or who carry into their twenties what they ought to have left behind, will now and then burn after-midnight candles in order to satisfy themselves—previously to satisfying the world—that they are geniuses. But it is surely rare for a man nearer to forty than to thirty, to be found wide awake and occupied with pen and ink at a time and in a place where sleep offers sovereign attractions. Yet so it was to-night. Chichester Fleetwood and all of his guests save one were dreaming of stubble-fields and well-

packed coveys. One, however, and he the least romantic of them all, was bending over ink and blotting-paper.

Perhaps he was a politician, and was preparing a speech for a great meeting at the neighbouring Mechanics' Institute? Not in the least. Were he but such, I fear we should not find him particularly interesting, and should certainly fail to make him so to those who are now asked to begin to pursue his fortunes.

The best way to find out what he is really doing will be to look coolly over his shoulder and see what he is writing. He has only just commenced a letter. How slowly he seems to get on with it! Surely he is writing a counterfeit hand! Watch him. Unquestionably he is. That will account in part for the slowness with which the letter proceeds. But perhaps the language is counterfeit too? In that case, he will be doubly slow. Let us read the language.

"I received your letter of the 31st with

great delight, for it proved to me that, though absent, I have never been out of your thoughts. See how selfish I am! I rejoice in your pain, because your pain shows your fidelity. Yet, how can you blame me, my dear pretty Jessie? If I did not rejoice, you would then be able to say that I no longer loved you.

“When shall we again meet, you ask? Soon, very soon; as soon as ever my pressing affairs here and elsewhere will permit of it.”

“Awfully pressing!” he said to himself aloud, with a slight laugh that was partly sneer. “The most occupied man in Europe. But then absence makes the heart grow fonder, they say, and little Jessie will learn to want me more and more the less she sees of me. And until I have cultivated her want of me to the very highest pitch, there’s not much chance. But I really must run down there again soon. Deuced slow, these fellows here, except Fleetwood himself, who is always amusing enough.

Just fancy a fellow having to put up with Fitz-Greville's drawl, and Fuddleton's foolish jokes, instead of being with the naïve Jessie. By Jove! how awfully pretty she is!"

He had drawn a photograph out of his breast-pocket, and was looking at it with eyes of genuine admiration, if without much semblance of love.

"Even those clumsy bumpkins cannot spoil her, with all their bad lenses and inferior collodion and inadequate booths. You're a beauty, child, and no mistake! How wonderful that such an outline should be found among that class! Very good of them to produce such specimens of the sex. Devilish uncommon, though."

He pushed his chair back, and rose from the table. Had strength and elegance ever entered into an expressed compromise, they could not have produced a more perfect proof of their honest unity of action than this man. Muscular power and manly grace had met in him, and come to an

agreement. He looked thirty-eight, and was in reality forty. But it was a forty that was suffering from no excesses. Nature had given him a grand constitution, and he showed how he appreciated the favour by never abusing it. He had risked his neck many a time, but he had never once drunk a single bumper too many, or allowed pleasure to end in exhaustion. He had never been fatigued in his life, but he had never even tried to experience the vaunted delights of indolence. Everybody allowed that he was handsome, but opinions differed as to whether the handsomeness was pleasant to look at. For an Englishman, his hair was dark. So were his moustaches, and so would have been his beard and whiskers had he worn them. But both these were shorn, leaving bare a jaw and chin that showed sufficient strength of purpose to anybody who does not judge of such by the clumsy and superficial standard of size. His eyes were dark brown, and clear as a boy's of sixteen; and between

beautiful but coldly-cut lips were teeth regular and white. He went to one of the windows, drew back a shutter, looked out, and then closed it again.

"Dark as a dog's mouth. Can't see a yard. What's the time? Half-past one. I think I had better go to bed. No! I'll finish the letter first, and then it can go off by to-morrow morning's bag."

He sat down at the writing-table and went on.

"I would hasten to you at once if I could. If we could but annihilate time and space! But even in these railway days lovers cannot always be happy, and you—why are you so far removed from railways and roads and everything?

"But when I do come, what reception will you give me? I adjure you to make up your mind, if it is not, as I trust, already made up. You know how I long to carry you off from the dull monotonous life which must be yours, and to introduce you to all the pleasures which an acquaintance

with the larger world affords. But then you must be prepared to confide in me, and to help me to bring about the result for which I so ardently long. Have you read the book I gave you when last we parted? Is it not a beautiful poem? Do you remember those exquisite lines——”

“By Jove! if she does, I don’t. How do they go?

‘Where souls each other draw,
Where Love is liberty, and Nature law.’

Yes, but what’s the beginning of the first line? Can’t remember, for my life. One ought to know. And then it does not do to quote incorrectly to these people, when they can find one out. And Jessie has the book. One loses influence by such blunders. They ought to think one knows everything and is infallible. How *does* the line go? How odd! There’s sure to be a Pope somewhere low down in the old library. I’ll go and see, and know once for all. It’s an important passage, and well worth knowing accurately by heart.”

He took up a candle and passed out of his bedroom into a square empty chamber, which seemed more as if intended for a passage or ante-room than for an independent apartment. Through it he passed by easily opening folding-doors into a room of very considerable size, around the walls of which were ranged, but with great irregularity, shelves of books that seemed to have been lately thrown into disorder and not yet put to rights again. The folding-doors closed with complete noiselessness, but with such rapidity as to create a gust that almost extinguished his candle. He saved the light, however, by a sudden halt and simultaneously screening it with his hand.

“Not such an easy matter, after all. A perfect wilderness of morocco covers. But when I was in here the other day, I noticed a lot of poets in this corner. Tillotson. That wont do. ‘Harvey on the——’ Got to the wrong corner, somehow. Ha! I see now. Of course. I entered the other day by *that* end. It’s the other corner I must go to.”

The floor was covered with an old Turkey pile carpet, much worn, and in some places positively threadbare; but it returned no audible sound to his slippared feet, as he walked diagonally from one corner to the other. Suddenly he stopped.

“What’s that noise, I wonder? Rats, probably. No; there ought not to be rats here. The place is in capital preservation.”

He listened attentively.

“And it was not mortar falling on or off the new scaffolding outside. It goes on all the time. What can it be?”

Again he listened. At first he was inclined to think that his original haphazard supposition was the right one, and that some sleepless rat was working behind the wainscoting. But the sound was too regular and unintermittent for that. He stood with his brows slightly knit, and with his head a little on one side, as one stands when one is suspending all one’s other faculties in order to give fuller force to the one faculty of hearing. Where did

the sound come from? From above? No. From below? Clearly not. This way, he thought. No, he was wrong. From that side. Yes—yes—yes. Scrape, scrape, scrape. It was outside, surely! He listened. Quietly. It was at a window that was ultimately going to be walled up, but which had as yet only been roughly planked in. He remembered Fleetwood saying so the other day, when they were talking of the alterations which were being made in that part of the house. Unless he was very much mistaken, somebody was trying to enter through it from outside. He smiled. How good! There was going to be an attempt at burglary, and he was master of the position. How lucky he had not gone to bed!

He was not a man to court danger for danger's sake, for the mere love of it and out of sheer lust of excitement. Quite the contrary. He was a brave man, but he was anything but a rash one. Indeed, he would on all occasions rather have avoided

danger than have sought it, and would certainly have slipped aside from it whenever he could have done so without loss of credit or self-respect. Cool and judicious, he knew that a varied life offers a sufficient number of unanticipated perils for it to be quite unnecessary for a man wantonly to evoke them. Hence he preferred to keep his valour in reserve for sterling emergencies. But in the present instance there was no danger whatsoever. Had it been possible to make such an opening through the planks which were being tampered with, as that two or three men could have entered at once or even in quick succession, he would either have alarmed the house forthwith, or at least have gone in search of a couple of other people, in order that he might meet the burglars on equal terms. As matters stood, however, only one man, and that not a very big one, could possibly be able to creep in at a time. And as he would be expecting that one burglar, whilst the latter would not

be expecting him at all, he would deal with his antagonist at an overwhelming advantage.

He looked upon the opportunity as one peculiarly admitting of the practice of coolness, and nothing more. A splendid swordsman is not usually a quarrelsome man, seeking on all occasions to extract a duel out of a conversation. But he gladly avails himself, if not otherwise employed, of every opportunity for improving his skill by taking a friendly bout with any other expert master of fence. Perhaps he would find in this instance a foeman worthy of his steel. Perhaps he would not. But in any case he could not fail to get the upper hand.

Having satisfied himself that his imagination was playing him no prank—and it had never presumed to take such a liberty with him yet—he reconnoitred the room once more. There was an old sofa, not very far from the newly planked-up window, but yet well away from the wall. The old window-

shutters, which extended to the floor, and opened down the middle, had not yet been removed, and there was abundance of room for him to screen himself behind one of them, which happened to be swung half open, at about right angles with the wall. He would place his candle on that little table, about a couple of yards away from where he was going to take his stand. There were matches in the basin of the candlestick, so that he could relight it at need. He listened attentively. The fellow was hard at work. He extinguished the candle, and crept to his post.

Of course, within the big library it was now pitch dark, and the darkness seemed to render the noise from outside more audible. Besides, the burglar was necessarily getting nearer to his object, and the sound of his labours was in reality more distinct. The face of the watcher would have been an excellent study, could it but have been seen. His lips had relaxed into a slight half-humorous smile, without parting one from

the other, and his chin was slightly protruded, as though it were the courier of his quiet pent-up determination. His pulse was not moving one in a minute faster or slower. He was simply waiting for the chance which should enable him to give his temper, judgment, and perhaps his muscles, just a little healthy exercise.

Waiting makes most men impatient, and few can stand long in a room, dark or light, without giving intimation of their presence by some movement, made with the object of relieving either the tiring or the irksome monotony of their position. He had a good quarter of an hour to wait, but he never stirred, to change foot, leg, or attitude. Had there been another listener within the dark room, he would have heard nothing in that long fifteen minutes to lead him to suppose that he was not alone.

At last, it became certain to him, though of course he could see nothing, that the burglar had made an aperture, and that his hand was within it. Quiet waiting in the

dark sharpens the other senses, in proportion as those usually kept most alive have been compulsorily suspended. It was not a hand now, he was sure, but an entire arm that was within. The fellow worked a little clumsily and incautiously, he thought; but that probably arose from extreme confidence that nobody could possibly be in the library. Two arms were through now, he could have sworn, though all was still as pitch dark as ever. Then they were withdrawn, and succeeded—yes, he was positive of it, as positive as if he had seen it—by the introduction of a head. He could distinctly hear the drawing through of the shoulders, and then the fresh intrusion of the arms.

Presently a long breath was drawn, and was succeeded by the completely audible but whispered monologue of—

“ There !—that’s done.”

Half a minute more, and the fellow would be standing in the room. Still, there was no light, and so far he had heard no words spoken to anybody outside. Was

the burglar alone? That was highly improbable. It could not have been an easy thing to get up to the aperture from without. True, there was a scaffolding; but as the ladder to it was of course removed every night, only a very lithe and active fellow could have climbed—for it must have been done by climbing—the main timbers of the scaffolding, so as to get to the place where he had been making himself an entrance. No doubt his confederates—if he had any—were below, and waiting to see the result of his efforts.

There he was; through! He was standing on the floor, right on the other side of the shutter. He was putting his head out of window, and far out. That also was audible enough. Would not this be a good moment for securing him? No; for he would be sure to call out, and the other fellows—if there were any—would get the alarm and run for it at once. Besides, there was no light, and it was better to see one's way as well as feel it.

"Hist! Bill! Bully Bill! Sam, old fellow! hist!"

Then there came a low whistle from below, rising and falling away slowly at either end, so that all piercing sharpness was taken away from it. Beyond this, our listener heard no answer from without to the above words, sibillated close to him through the window.

"That's all right. They can't see, I dare say; but they know I'm in now, safe enough. Where the devil's the match-box? I have it."

He drew the match along the sole of his boot.

"Why the devil doesn't it light? By Jove! if they haven't got wet in that beastly rain of this afternoon!"

He tried another, but with the same result.

"What an ass! It's not the matches, it's the boot that's wet. What a sell if they had been!"

Then he scraped a match on the wall,

and a light shot out immediately. Then came the clinking sound of the opening of a lantern, a pause, a growing, steadying light, and the closing of the lantern. A moment, and he had advanced beyond the shutter. Another moment, almost before another moment, the lantern was snatched out of his hand, and he felt himself swung violently round, and hurled backwards on to something soft. There was a terribly strong man's hand at his throat, and a terribly strong man's knee on his chest. Then the light of his own lantern was thrown full on his face.

"Why, it's Abraham! Lying Abraham, as I live! Do you remember *me*, you vagabond?"

"Yes, my lord," said the fellow, gasping for breath on the sofa, though his lordship had not only let go of his throat, but having roughly passed his hand over his clothes so as to satisfy himself that no weapons of offence were secreted in them, had released him entirely, and now stood passively by his side, with the lantern in his hand.

"Yes, my lord; remember your lordship

perfectly. I should think so. Everybody remembers how Lord Rendover was the best cue in Potzer's rooms; many a long month as it is since they've seen you there, my lord."

Abraham might have sat for the *beau idéal* of a billiard-marker, did such a subject fairly belong to the painter or the sculptor. Lithe, slight, but badly made; cunning, impudent, servile, no age in particular, ugly, familiar, and cowardly; he immediately fell into the old attitude of forward deference the moment he recognised the man who, of all the myriads who in his time had swung in and out of the folding-doors of Potzer's, had been both by him and them the most feared and the most truckled to. Even there he had never ventured on a real impertinence to Lord Rendover. His awful reverence for that personage was due partly to the fact that he had never seen his match either at pool or pyramids, but also to the fact that he had been witness of two memorable scenes in one of which, under small but sufficient

provocation, his lordship had knocked big Septimus Blacklock down as flat as a flounder, and in the other of which, under intolerable insolence, he had dragged the Hon. Thersites Cheek right across the room by the scruff of the neck, along the narrow, awkward passage, then discharged that, to him, light cargo in the street gutter, and forthwith returned and played surer and better even than he had ever been known to play before. Some recollections of that old life perhaps rose up again before Lord Rendover also, as he stood smiling good-naturedly enough at the lick-spittle, brazen-faced, miserable little wretch who now stood before him, adjusting the collar of his somewhat disordered coat.

"You're not much of a burglar, Abraham, I fear. The old ways stick to you. You don't like to have your shirt front rumpled or blacked, as we used to rumple and black it for you sometimes at Potzer's."

"Yes, my lord. And very jolly it was. Should like to have it blacked again,

though I mightn't sometimes seem to like it then."

"You've left Potzer's then, have you? What did you do that for?"

"Why, you see, my lord, they're a rough lot that goes there sometimes; not at all like your lordship and your lordship's set."

Rendover could not help smiling as he heard the fellow's complimentary tone, and remembered how he and "his set" had many a time in their very convivial moments treated Abraham to a few practical jokes, which even they in their sober ones had confessed among themselves to be rather too strong.

"They're not all gentlemen that goes to Potzer's, my lord."

"Not quite all, Abraham," said Lord Rendover, drily.

"And if your lordship had not given up coming to Potzer's; if your lordship had only been there when it happened, I'm sure your lordship wouldn't have let it happen at all."

"No doubt I should not, Abraham. But what was it that did happen? Did they make you swallow the chalk, or bolt all the balls that were out of baulk at the end of the game? I certainly should have interfered to prevent that."

Abraham laughed a mean little servile laugh.

"They tried to make out that I was bribed by Potting Hayes—you remember him, my lord?"

"Yes, as big a scoundrel as ever made a stroke."

"I dare say he was, my lord. Am sure he was, since your lordship says it. But they tried to make out that I was bribed by him to mark unfairly, and——"

"And they kicked you out, Abraham, did they? Very wrong of them. And you've taken to this little trade instead?"

"It's the first time I've tried it, my lord. Upon my word it is! And only after trying to get a place at all the rooms in London, and failing. Failing, my lord, because fellows

had spread that beastly—I beg your pardon, my lord! but—that—that lie about me everywhere. I swear, my lord, it's the first time I ever tried it on; and I swear it shall be the last, if you only let me go, my lord."

"It will probably be the last, even if I don't. Don't you see that, Abraham?"

"Yes, my lord," he answered, trying to conceal his horrible fear behind a repetition of the mean little laugh. "But I think you might let me off, my lord, this time, as it's the first."

"Well, let us see about it. How many are there of you? You had better tell me the truth. For whether you tell me the truth or you don't, you'll equally find me more than your match."

"Yes, my lord; I'm quite sure of that."

And Abraham fully meant what he said.

"And how many are there of you then?"

Lord Rendover had changed his tone, and now addressed Abraham in words of command and authority, all familiarity being laid aside. He knew he could frighten the

cunning creature out of his skin, even out of his cunning.

"How many are there of you?" he repeated in a voice sharp and rapid.

"We're three, my lord, at this business."

"And where are the other two?"

"Down below, my lord; outside, in the garden."

"How did you get up there? And why did they stop below?"

He asked the questions so quickly and with such an incisive manner that Abraham also was forced to answer quickly and to the purpose. There was no room for premeditated deception, even had Abraham had the courage to attempt it.

"I climbed up the scaffolding, my lord. I'm more active and smaller than they are, my lord."

"Active enough. And who are the other two? What are their names?"

"We call them Bully Bill and Sam Slaughteros, please, my lord."

"Terrible fellows, eh?"

"Pretty well, my lord."

"And how are they to get in?"

"I was to let them in, my lord."

"But you say they can't get up the scaffolding."

"I was to let them in down below, by the hall, or some of the windows."

"I see."

"But you'll let me go, my lord, wont you?"

His lordship had put the lantern down well out of sight, and turned the eye of it quite away from the aperture through which Abraham had entered. But he had taken the additional precaution, needless though it seemed, of silently swinging the shutter against it also. So that Bully Bill and Sam Slaughteros, looking in the direction in where their lither colleague had entered, would see no light and would conclude that he had already made his way down to the ground-floor, and was all this time trying to discover the door or other entrance by which he could best admit them.

"You will, wont you, my lord?" asked Abraham again at the end of a minute or more, during which Lord Rendover had been walking silently up and down the centre of the room, evidently meditating what course he would pursue.

"Let you go, Abraham?" he said, dropping his tone of sharp severity, and returning to the old tone of contemptuous banter; "I think not. On the whole, I think not."

"But, my lord, I assure you, my lord——"

"Quietly, Abraham. You disturb me. I'm thinking something over. No, no, no! You're three altogether, you say? Not more?"

"Only three, my lord; I'll swear it."

"Never mind swearing. You're three, and you came purposely to commit a burglary, did you?"

"Am sorry to say, my lord, we did."

"You need not be sorry, Abraham. Indeed, I think you had better commit it. It's a pity for a thing so excellently well commenced to be abandoned. And then,

you see, as far as you are concerned, you have already committed it, and *I* know it. Just reflect over that a little, Abraham. You have committed a burglary, and I, Lord Rendover, know that you have."

He paused a little, and went on walking up and down the centre of the room, still evidently pondering some matter over very intently. Shortly, he again spoke.

"Have you reflected over that, Abraham?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And does it strike you that, even if I choose to let you go now, you'll be no better off than if I let you go when you have admitted your friends, and the entire purpose of the burglary has been effected? I think I could still contrive to find you?"

"Yes, my lord. But I wouldn't try to get away from you. I'll always do what your lordship wishes, and come when your lordship wants me."

"Very obliging of you, Abraham. Where are your head-quarters now?"

"At the 'Cut and Shuffle,' Saint Giles, my lord. I dare say your lordship never heard of it."

"I can't say I ever did."

"It ain't a very aristocratic neighbourhood, my lord. But I'm always to be found there now, my lord, by them as knows how to look for me."

"Are they very desperate fellows, Bill what's-his-name, and——"

"Not so very, my lord, unless they're made. I think they'd rather not hurt a man, unless they were driven to it."

"That's all right. Now, look here; you do precisely what I tell you."

"Yes, my lord, to the letter; every word of it."

"You have lost time already; you must lose no more. It suits me that this burglary should be committed by the whole three of you. You will trust me, and I, for once, shall be forced to trust you. Only if you try to deceive me, I can easily find you, and have you nabbed for this."

"But I wont attempt to deceive you, my lord."

"I have no doubt you will not; for you must have wit enough to see that, if you tried, you would not succeed. You will admit those fellows outside, without ever saying a word to them about me. You will pretend that everything has gone all right, but that you have lost your time in finding your way and in being cautious. You understand."

"Yes, my lord; I'll never breathe your name to them."

"And now I'll tell you a short way of letting them in; see here."

He walked across the room, and Abraham followed him.

"This is a door; there it goes!"

He had put his hand upon one of the bookshelves, and part of the wall, books and all, opened noiselessly outwards into a small ante-chamber, not unlike the one at the other end of the library through which he had passed on his way to it from his own

bedchamber. There was a door, now wide open, which gave from it on to a small landing and the top of a circular staircase.

"That will lead you down into the hall; to the left of it is the dining-room. You had better admit them through one of the dining-room windows, which you will find easy enough to open; only ordinary shutters. Are you listening attentively? you needn't be afraid."

"No, my lord; for I'm sure your lordship doesn't mean to harm me. I'm listening to every word of it."

"Having let them in, bring them up that staircase at once, and straight through the library. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord, perfectly."

"You see those folding-doors at the other end? They lead into a little passage-room, just like this. Beyond that is my bedroom; you will lead them into it."

"Into your bedroom, my lord?"

"Yes, into my bedroom. I shall undress at once, put out my candle, go to bed, and

pretend to be asleep. You will tell them that you passed through my bedroom without awakening me; that I am sleeping soundly, and that beyond my room there is another, a sort of drawing-room, where there are plenty of things worth taking."

"And are there, my lord?"

"What do you mean, you scoundrel? Of course there are; don't I tell you so, you fool?"

"Yes, my lord; I beg your lordship's pardon, I'm sure."

"As you all pass through my room, I shall pretend to awake. I suppose one of them is sure to be down upon me."

"Yes, my lord; I'm sure Sam will, at any rate."

"All right," said his lordship, coolly. "I won't hurt him; he can't expect an unarmed man in bed and in his nightshirt to make a very terrible resistance."

"I wouldn't advise you to do so, my lord."

"Keep your advice to yourself, Abraham. I shan't call out, you may be sure. As I

said, he will stop and try to gag me, I suppose, whilst you two other fellows go on and take what is worth having. I'll leave some money and a few things upon my dressing-table, and what I don't want you to take, I'll hide in the library here, behind one of the books. See, we'll do it now; and then you may go and let them in."

He relighted his own candle and took Abraham with him across the library, through the little square passage, and through his own bedroom into a handsomely-furnished chamber, where there was plenty to delight the eye of the virtuoso and tempt the hand of the thief.

"See; that door leads on to the main landing and the main staircase of the house. But—quietly!—as you see by the boots outside that door, there's somebody else sleeping there, and if you attempt to pass along it, you'll be likely enough to rouse him. You can point that out to your fellows, and show how it will be better for them to be content with what they find

here and in my bedroom, and to go back by the way they came, without trying anything else."

"Yes, my lord. And as Sam 'll be busy with you, they'll be in a hurry to get away. I understand it all, my lord. And you intend us all to get away."

"Of course I do. All you have got to do, is to say not a word to them about me, but to make believe that everything has happened quite naturally, or—well, all the worse for you. This way."

They re-entered Lord Rendover's bedroom.

"I should not like you to take this—nor this—nor that. That's about all. You're welcome to the rest. Come along."

They were again in the library. He made no secret of where he put the things he did not wish to be stolen. He felt he had Abraham in the hollow of his hand.

"There! They will be safe behind that big book. They would never think of looking there for anything."

"Of course not, my lord."

"And now go and let them in, and I shall go to bed. And mark you, Abraham, if you funk it, or if you think you will do better by telling them all about what has happened and by cutting away at once, I pity you, that's all."

"But I wont, my lord. I'll do just as you've told me, my lord."

"All right. Away with you, then."

CHAPTER II.

SO FAR, SUCCESSFUL.

ABRAHAM's task had now become a comparatively easy one. The topography of the house had been made simple to him by Lord Rendover's clear explanations. He would gain considerable credit with Bully Bill and Sam Slaughteros for the mastery which he had obtained of the position, and which they would suppose he had obtained entirely by his own coolness and dexterity. The only task which he now had to perform was to go straight to a window and open it, and for the rest to keep his own counsel and hold his tongue.

As he crept cautiously down the circular staircase which, despite all his caution, would persist in creaking a little, he grew

only strengthened in the conclusion that he must do exactly what Lord Rendover had told him. He had a superstitious terror for the man whom he had long been accustomed to see work wonders in the department of life to which he had himself so long belonged. And then Lord Rendover was not only the very best billiard-player whom Abraham had ever seen—and he had seen a fair number—but he was a lord, immensely rich, fiercely strong, and coolly courageous. To challenge such a man's decision or hostility would have seemed to Abraham, and to braver men than Abraham, very like challenging fate. Bully Bill was a foul-mouthed fellow enough, and Sam Slaughteros was a rough-and-ready sort of a customer, not always very agreeable to deal with. But they could be outwitted, whilst Lord Rendover could not. They were far less terrible than his lordship.

Besides, in this instance, he was told to do nothing that would arouse their anger. What Lord Rendover's object was in allow-

ing the burglary to be committed, Abraham could not conceive. But at any rate, it was not in order to entrap all three, instead of entrapping one and letting the other two go. His confederates would get all they expected from the enterprise, and would be well satisfied with his share in it. Even if they were taken up for it afterwards, they would not be led to attribute their capture to him, and he would be no worse off than he was at present, now that Lord Rendover already knew of his attempt and could denounce it. No. His own chance of safety depended entirely upon obeying Lord Rendover to the letter.

He had no difficulty whatever in finding the dining-room, or in opening the first window of it that he tried. Having done so, he had just as little in attracting the attention of his fellows, who were posted, as it happened at the moment, near to that very spot.

"Is it al right, Abe?" asked a broad-shouldered, shock-headed, red-haired fellow, shoving in his shaven pimply face.

"Right as a trivet, Sam. You never saw anything so pretty in your life."

"You've been a precious long time," said the other, coming forward, and displaying a head and face as big and round as Sam's, but with a thick Newgate frill under his chin, big black bushy eyebrows, and a head of hair rusty-brown and densely matted. "What the devil made you such a while about it?"

"Come, Bill, old boy, don't be so impatient. I had to be cautious, you know."

"You're always so mighty cautious," answered Bully Bill, pulling himself up and getting through the window. "Is there summut to drink?"

"Let's see. I haven't looked. But wait till Sam's through."

They were now all three in the dining-room, and the two who had just entered proceeded at once to take off their boots.

"I suppose you left yours upstairs, Abe? How did you get down? Tell us all about it. And sharp's the word."

Of course all this rough conversation was carried on in a whisper, to which all three seemed so thoroughly accustomed as to be able to make it audible enough to each other without any special effort of listening, and yet without making any sound calculated to betray their presence. In just such a whisper Abraham went on to tell them what he had discovered, and what he thought they had better do under the circumstances.

“So there’s a cove asleep, is there, and we’ll have to pass through his room? What sort of a cove to look at?”

“I didn’t look very closely,” said Abraham, “for I was afraid to wake him, though he seemed sound enough.”

“Did he snore at all?” asked Sam.

“Not a bit. Quiet as a babe.”

“Then he’s sound enough,” said Sam, “they only wakes when they snores.”

“And there’s lots of stuff in the room beyond him, is there?”

“Yes, and some in his room too.”

"You haven't boned any o' that already, have yer?" said Bill, feeling at Abraham's pockets.

"Bill!" said Abraham, reproachfully, "as if I'd think of such a thing! No, no; fair play's a jewel. Honour bright, you know."

"Ay, ay, that's the word. And what sort of a door leads from that grand room you spoke of on to the big landing?"

"An ordinary door. But we mustn't go beyond it, I'm sure. There are other rooms give on to it; and we'd much better keep to this one part of the house, that's both safe and easy."

"Right again, Abe," said Sam. "I'm for force and daring when there's no getting on without 'em, but if you can do a trick peaceably, do it. That's my motto. One needn't upset the mug to get at the liquor."

"Speaking o' liquor," said Bully Bill, "I wonder if there's any hereabouts. There's three or four decanters atop o' that rum

thing; but I'll lay a joey there isn't a drop o' nothing in none o' them."

Bully Bill was quite right. There was not. There was what he called a "cross between a jug and a pump, in which there was some nasty flat stuff tasting o' lemon and French rinsins"—claret-cup, perhaps,—at which he took a short drain, pronouncing it "a mouthful too much."

"Come along, Bill," said Sam, "we'd better not waste time down here. If 'it 'ad been the cellar we were in, well enough. But perhaps it's lucky it isn't. Better be sober and get what there is to be got in valeyables, and turn some on 'em into good honest drink where honest drink's to be got, at the 'Cut and Shuffle.'"

"Come along, then," said Bill, who, having earned his name of "Bully" not without good cause, invariably gave in to the more really determined Sam, when he saw Sam was in earnest. "Come along, then. But I'm going to cover up my own phiz, as we're to pass through that cove's

bedroom. He might wake, you know; and if he did—it's best to be on the safe side."

"So says I," answered Sam. And the two forthwith adjusted light masks to their faces, which certainly gave them an expression both more humorous and more benevolent than they had worn before.

"Abe hasn't got one, I'll swear. No. In course he hasn't. Well, it doesn't much matter. You keep out of the way, young 'un, and don't let the fellow see you, if he should awake, that's all. Sam or I'll tackle him, if so be an' he starts up."

"I'll tackle him," said Sam, laconically. "Now, Abe, lead on to glory."

He led them cautiously and noiselessly up the spiral staircase, and into the big library.

"This is summut like a room," said Bill, looking round patronizingly.

"Rather too many books for my taste," said Sam. "I'd rather ha' had a newspaper or two, if it wore all the same to them; just a number of *Lloyd's* or *The Life*, just to break the 'notony of the thing. But

there ain't a blessed fly-sheet nowhere. And they read all *them*, do they, Abe? Well, that's rum."

Abraham was on ahead a little, and Bill was close at his heels, for he seemed never to let the "young 'un," as he called him—though Abraham was a couple of years older than himself—out of his sight when he could help it. Sam seemed to regret not being allowed time to indulge his taste for observation, and to examine more closely a place that he ever afterwards declared to be "the rummiest den that a chap was ever let loose in, and that Wombwell's biggest van was a fool to it." But his own professional turn was too strong for him, and he silently quickened his feet and passed with the other two through the silently-moving folding-doors, whose motion, it will be remembered, had well nigh extinguished Lord Rendover's candle. Their light was Abraham's lantern, which was not exposed to the same dangers.

"Cautiously now, my boys," said Abra-

ham, assuming an unwonted air of leadership, which was justified by his superior knowledge of the ground. "This is the room where the cove's asleep."

"You go first, then," said Sam. "Bill goes second, and I'll lag behind, and just take a peep at our friend, and see that he's having pleasant dreams."

They entered the room, and heard no sound. But conversation was now suspended among them. They communicated only by gestures. Abraham took Bully Bill by the sleeve and led him to the dressing-table,ⁿ where carelessly lay Lord Rendover's hunting-watch and chain, just one ring, seven sovereigns, and a mixture of twice as many half-crowns and shillings, and a pocket-book with nothing in but some visiting-cards, and half-sheets of paper written over with memoranda. All these Bill stowed quietly away into his pocket, and then followed Abraham into the next room, whilst Sam stood bending over the bedside.

The sleeper seemed to be as little disturbed by the opening of the door that led out of his bedroom as he had been by the opening of the one that led into it. But Sam remained by the bedside all the same, whence he could just hear now and then the movement of his friends in the next room among the "valeyables." But by degrees Lord Rendover seemed to be becoming less comfortable and sound in his slumber. He breathed more loudly. Then he was still again. Then he slightly snored. Sam watched him with attentive and noiseless attitude. He turned just a little on his side, and gradually almost lay on his back. He looked as if he might possibly awake. Sam was quite ready for him if he did. He began breathing heavily again. Then the breathing ceased. He half opened his eyes. He closed them again. But the light had struck them, and he opened them again—this time fully—and gave a slight start. Sam's hands were tight at his throat.

"I'd advise you to lie still," growled Sam into his ear, under his mask. "I'll not hurt you, if you don't force me to."

"But—but—you — are — hur — hur — hurting me," gasped out the prisoner as well as he could.

"Lie still and hold your tongue, and I'll not hurt you more nor I can help. But if you stir or shout, I'll hurt you till you'll never stir or scream again. All right, Bill! I've got him. Look sharp."

These last words were addressed to Bill, who, quick to detect any sort of noise, had come in to see if the "cove" had awoke.

"We must make short work of it, young 'un!" he said, returning to Abraham. "'Deed, I think we've got all the valeyables that's moveable and worth carryin'. Come along? That's the door you spoke of, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Abraham, "but you'd better not open it."

"Teach your grandmother," retorted Bill. "Now Sam, my hearty, we're all ready, aren't we?"

“Just a second. “I’ve been tryin’ not to hurt this cove; but I believe I’ve at nearly throttled him as not. But he’ll get over it in time, if he’s lucky. The taste’ll last him ten minutes or so more, and we’d best be making the most of the ten minutes to sheer off clear o’ all this. On with you!”

Sam gave one more look at the prostrate man, saw that he looked pretty much as he had described him, and then made after the others. Again he would have liked to linger in the library, which seemed to have for him such a fascination as a menagerie has for children and nursemaids. But he controlled his feelings, and descended the spiral staircase close at their heels. Below, they prepared to put on their boots again. Abraham then remembered that his were upstairs in the library, where he had taken them off when he first made his way through the aperture.

“Then you’ll have to do without ’em now, young ’un,” said Bully Bill. “We

never runs no risks. Up with you, and we'll follow."

One by one they passed through the window, and disappeared into the night.

Lord Rendover had certainly just passed through the most disagreeable five minutes of his life. Not resisting an enemy, indeed not getting the better of one, was quite pain enough to him, and we may be sure that he would not have endured it without some very strong motive. But over and above the annoyance of having to seem to submit to the physical degradation, he had also endured no slight physical torture. It is true that he had feigned to be worse for Sam's continuous grip than he really was. Nevertheless, his throat and windpipe, even now that they were released, were anything but comfortable; and he felt that, had the operation lasted as long again, he would have had either to resist or to be very seriously and permanently injured. Very little more, and he questioned if he would not have fainted. As it was, he felt no little difficulty

at first in pulling himself up and getting out of bed. But to his strong nerves and grand physique every moment of regained liberty was a moment of accelerating recovery; and before a couple of minutes or so more were over, he stood erect in the centre of the room, not only perfectly conscious, but feeling, as ever, firm, brawny, and vigorous. Listening afresh, he half thought he heard a sound as of their footsteps returning. Surely they could not be coming back?

“No; it is the scoundrels getting out of window. There they go, and the devil go with them—until I want you again, my fine fellows! I always thought Abraham would turn out to be useful some day or other. The creature was born to mark other men’s scores.”

He put on his slippers, his panjambas, and his dressing-gown, and walked to his toilet-table, and examined his throat.

“He has left his mark, and no mistake. It was not a bad sort of a grip, but I imagine

mine would be worse. I may have hold of the vagabond's throat some day. Who knows? It's just as well that it's as bad as it is. It would never do to appear at breakfast, without the visible traces of treatment too forcible to resist. I fear I shall lose a little of my bruising reputation for not having resisted; but then one must make sacrifices of some sort when one wants a thing, and it's a loss I can easily make up at some other time, if any fellow thinks to presume upon it. I should not advise anybody to try. Besides, who could be expected, waking up in bed and finding himself literally pinned to the pillow, to offer any sort of resistance. But it's not pretty," he added, looking more closely at the welts raised on his throat. Then he glanced from the looking-glass to the toilet-table. "They've made a pretty sweep of it. All gone—watch and all. Cheap at the price, however, if things turn out as they ought to do."

He was thoroughly himself again by this

time. He put one or two little touches to himself in the way of making himself both more comely and more comfortable, and went into the library to bring back the things which he had hidden, in Abraham's presence, behind the books. These he found just as he had left them, and returned with them to his own room in quiet triumph.

"He played fair, it seems. He was in too mortal a funk to do otherwise. He evidently did just as I bade him. Lucky for him he did. . . And now I'll finish the letter to Jessie. I might as well go in for the whole thing, now. I've got another string to my bow, in case I want it."

He sat down again at the writing-table, where we first looked over his shoulder. Let us do so again.

"I never found the quotation. Those fellows interrupted me. Never mind. I found something a great deal more to the purpose than a poet's couplet. Wont bother about that now. Better go on with

the letter straight. Where did I leave off?"

He readjusted the paper, and wrote—

"But in order, my pretty Jessie, to give both liberty and love a chance, you must get over your scruples about formalities, and have full confidence in me. I mean to make you the happiest, brightest, cheeriest little creature in the world. But I can do so only by your permitting me to be the judge as to the preliminary steps. Think of the glorious life we shall have together. I have seen a horse that will carry you splendidly. And then the boating that we will have together, of which you are so fond. I will take you to all the beautiful places not only in England, but in countries, still more beautiful, of which you have only read, but which I have seen and shall be delighted to show you."

There was more to the same effect, and all written with the purpose, as far as one could judge, of inflaming the imagination of a girl by displaying before it visions of

simple joys, untasted but not undreamt of. Then the writer would return to the necessity of her placing implicit confidence in his judgment, and of sacrificing her own unskilled notions of what was for the best to his foreseeing discretion. Between this necessity and the picture of what sweet pleasures were in store for her, if she would only defer to this necessity, the letter kept constantly but dexterously oscillating.

At length it was finished; and, as it seemed, to the writer's satisfaction. He folded it, and enclosed it in an envelope, which he addressed—still in a feigned hand—thus:

Miss Jessie Shoreham,

Post Office, Dipleydale.

In a couple of minutes he was undressed, and very shortly fast asleep.

“There was a burglary on the premises last night,” said Fuddleton, with a professional air, to Fitz-Greville, as the latter

sauntered in from an early visit to the Fleetwood stables, looking as fresh as the morning, and quite as cool and unconcerned.

“A burglawy, was there? Ha, indeed! Have heard of such things. You hang fellows for doing it, don't you, or impwison them, or do something with them, don't you?”

Fuddleton had lately taken silk, but was still the great defending counsel in heavy criminal cases on the Southern Circuit. A bigger blockhead never wore a gown. But then he was not at all aware of the fact. Neither were the attorneys. And as, if he had the brains of an ass, he had also the lungs of one, he was not altogether badly equipped for his main occupation. Fuddleton was dull, but jurymen were usually still duller; and as the accused were always guilty, and he occasionally got them off, Fuddleton was held amongst country lawyers' clerks and some county magistrates to be one of the cleverest and most specious of mankind.

Chichester Fleetwood did not think much of him. But as some of his neighbours did, and Chichester Fleetwood was good-natured, and Fuddleton had picked up a considerable number of good stories in court and at mess, he was made welcome every autumn at the Manse for a week or ten days' shooting.

"It all depends," answered Fuddleton, putting on his grandest legal air. "Burglary, if committed within certain hours of the night and attended with violence, is still punishable with death. I have heard sentence of death for such offences passed several times, and it has been my good fortune on more than one occasion to save from the penalty, by my professional skill, fellows who richly deserved it."

"I don't think I should much care to have done that," said the calm scion of an exceeding calm house. "And if I had, I question if I should find the recollection of my skill so agreeable as it seems to be to you."

"Duty, you know, duty. There's no

help for it. Somebody else would have to do it, if I did not; though I must say there are not many men on the Southern who could do it, except myself. A poor lot, the new race of juniors. But, as I was going to say, though sentence of death is pronounced, it is never carried out now-a-days, for such offences as those we have been talking of."

"Which is much to be wegwetted," answered Fitz-Greville. "They don't hang half enough. Better out of the way, those wough fellows."

And he took up a thin slice of brown bread and butter, just to stay the hungry edge of appetite till the breakfast bell rang, and the host should make his appearance.

This he did almost immediately. He had heard of the burglary from his valet, for it had been the talk of the entire household ever since they had been astir, and he entered the room full of it. In a couple of minutes more in came Lord Rendover.

“Why, Rendover, some fellows broke into the house last night!”

“I should think they did. Just look at my throat!”

They all crowded round him.

“You don’t mean to say that——” exclaimed one.

“How the deuce did——” exclaimed another.

“I mean to say that I awoke in the middle of the night, and before I could say Jack Robinson, I felt myself pinned to the bed, and pressed down as tight as a cockchafer to a cork. I need hardly say I’d have shown fight if I could; but it was too late. I had neither limb nor muscle to make use of. I felt the blood rushing to my head, my head swimming, and then—why, then—I remember nothing more till I awoke, and felt devilish queer, and crept out of bed, and got myself some brandy out of my dressing-bag, and found my watch, my chain, a couple of rings—look there!”—and he held out his bare

fingers—"and some seven or eight pounds there were on the table, all gone!"

"What an audacious attempt!" said Fuddleton.

"Glad it was you, not me, Wendover," drawled out Fitz-Greville.

"They seem to have got in by that window I pointed you out in the library the other day," said Fleetwood.

"We must go and examine the spot carefully after breakfast," said Fuddleton.

"Yes, after breakfast," said Fitz-Greville, tapping an egg. "After breakfast; not before, I vote. Some coffee, Wobert."

"One of the fellows—in his hurry, I suppose—left his shoes there as he entered."

"They must be kept," said Fuddleton, with an air of fussy importance. "On no account must they be lost; they may turn out to be a most important link in the chain of evidence."

"But, tell us, Rendover," said the host, "do you know how many fellows there were altogether?"

“Yes, three. At least, I saw only three. Two of them wore masks.”

“And the third?” asked Fuddleton.

“Didn’t see his face at all,” answered his lordship, laconically.

“We didn’t know they had been through your room at all. I have been talking it all over with Robert and Cleaver, and they thought that one fellow had got in at the library, had gone downstairs by the small staircase, admitted the other fellows, and that then all three of them had crept up the main staircase, on to the landing—by your room, Fitz-Greville, you know—and so entered the room where I keep all my pretty follies for the women to look at and amuse themselves with, when they’re staying here.”

“I guessed as much,” said Rendover. “I mean, that they had gone in there; but through my room to it, not by the main staircase at all.”

“And that’s what they have done, my lord,” said Robert; “they never went near

the main staircase at all; they must have gone up the little spiral one, through the library, through your lordship's room, and on into the other one, where they've taken a fine lot o' things, I can assure you."

"But I hope you're no worse, Rendover," said Fleetwood, with the proper sympathy of a host. "Upon my word, I'm awfully sorry."

"Not at all, just a little shaken; wind-pipe a little queer, but soon got over it. I'm sorry for you. I wish I had awoke sooner, and I'd have astonished them—the brutes. I fear you'll be the great loser. My things weren't worth much."

"A hundred and fifty pounds, at least—watch, rings, and everything."

"Never mind. I would give ten times as much to have that fellow by the throat that had me by mine before I knew where I was."

"But why didn't you knock some of us up, Rendover," asked Fuddleton, "as soon as ever you could?"

“Bravo! Fuddleton. Every man to his last,” answered Rendover, gaily. “You’d have been knocked up, but in a very different sense, if you had been in my position; so knocked up, that I don’t think you would have been down to breakfast this morning at all. Why, man, how long do you suppose I was in coming round? And when I did come round, can’t you understand I was only too glad to be quiet? And where was the use, such a dark night as it was, and long after the fellows were far away?”

“Not a bit of use,” said Fitz-Greville; “vewy glad you didn’t, Wendover; gwheat bore to be woke out of one’s sleep, after a fellow has taken such a deuced deal of twouble to fall into it.”

“Quite right, quite right,” said Fleetwood. “The grooms rode off to the police station the first thing, to give information, and the rascals will be nabbed before long, no doubt.”

“It’s a pity, though,” said Fuddleton,

“so much valuable time has been wasted. But keep the shoes. On no account lose sight of the shoes; they are of the very first importance.”

But though the shoes were not lost sight of, though the grooms had ridden straight off to the police-station, and though Fuddleton devoted the whole of his abilities to encouraging and inspiring the local authorities in their search for the malefactors, a week passed away without their being discovered, or any available trace of them being hit upon. The county papers were full of the burglary committed at Fleetwood Manse; and the police had, of course, put themselves in more silent communication with their brethren in the detective craft elsewhere. But all in vain. Neither through jewellers, nor pawnbrokers, nor publicans, was any clue obtained to the burglars, or to the property which they had carried off. It was quite clear that they had managed to get back, without delay, to London, whence it was concluded

they had probably come. In that vast abode of knaves and honest men, amateur thieves and professional receivers, where nearly all deeds, even if committed in broad daylight, may be made deeds of darkness, if only the perpetrators be sufficiently skilled, the three men who had broken into Fleetwood Manor, and treated Lord Rendover so roughly, were universally concluded to have sought and found impunity and shelter. By degrees, the burglary, if it was not wholly forgotten, ceased to be talked of; the more rapidly because, within a month after, an old woman poisoned three of her grandchildren in the same neighbourhood, and turned the attention of an enlightened public to the details of her more interesting crime and surer punishment.

CHAPTER III.

JESSIE SHOREHAM.

EIGHTEEN months before our story opens, the prettiest girl in Taunton was Jessie Shoreham, the humpbacked schoolmaster's daughter. Kate Tiptree was certainly a very pretty girl, and her golden hair was a distraction even to the most devout of the congregation; and the Miss Silvertops were sweet-looking creatures, particularly, as old Mrs. Wareing used to say, "when they had on their lovely bonnets and not those nasty hats, just like everybody else—which in the squire's daughters was unbecoming, to say the least of it." But when you had gone the entire round of the congregation, and lauded this one's hair, that

one's features, and that other one's figure, you were forced to fall in with the general Taunton opinion, and confess that for real beauty—beauty that was beautiful in bonnet, or hat, or nothing at all—not one of the Taunton girls was fit to hold a candle to Jessie Shoreham.

But if everybody peaceably acquiesced in the verdict as to her beauty, it was impossible to arrive at anything like unanimity as to her behaviour. Whilst some persisted in declaring that she was an exceedingly forward young woman, others maintained that she was as retiring and modest as any girl could be expected to be who was the recognised belle of the township. Three old maiden sisters, who lived with their bachelor brother, a retired architect, stoutly reiterated on every possible occasion, that she gave herself airs, both in church and out of it, to which her position did not at all entitle her; and that it was a disgraceful thing to see a mere schoolmaster's daughter smirking down the aisle as though she

were a lady born and could do no wrong. Kind, widowed Mrs. Charity Humble, on the other hand, who was a lady born, and feared that she herself, if nobody else, was always doing wrong, for her part liked to see the pretty things know that they were pretty; and when the service was over, and the organ was playing them all out, she did not see what harm there was in the young people giving each other a friendly smile. With herself, and poor old things like her, it was different. She had nobody to smile at now, and she ought to give a good example, and she prayed hard and tried to do so, but she feared she succeeded very indifferently. She was quite sure she meant no wrong, two and fifty years ago, when she used to glance round to see if Ralph Humble was at service, and if he was, when she gave him the sweetest smile she could muster. Jessie Shoreham had always been a favourite of hers, ever since Ralph had patted the schoolmaster's child on the head and given her half-a-crown to buy a new

hymn-book with. And Jesse had shown her the very book only the other day; and was that being forward?

From which I think we may conclude that, though Jessie Shoreham was superior in external advantages to most of her sex, she was neither much better nor much worse in other respects. She was no wonder of severe virtue; but, on the other hand, she was no lighter than the most sensible moralist would wish to see the fairer and younger portion of God's creatures. Her father—mother, alas! she had none—was perfectly well contented with her conduct; and we may be sure that, tender as he was to the big beams in his own eye, he would have been swift to discover and condemn any serious mote in hers. He was rather a worthless old vagabond in reality; but being both a schoolmaster and a cripple, he indulged in those transgressions which are of a silent and unscandalizing nature, in preference to any of the more outrageous ones which would have injured at once his

professional position and his poor puny frame. If he ever and anon got whimsically drunk, he got drunk at home and out of school hours. He was a great prop of the church choir, and never appeared anything but perfectly sober when a new anthem had to be practised or a new response to be approved.

Tuition at Taunton, as may be supposed, is not the most remunerative of occupations, and some folks used to wonder how Jessie managed to dress so smartly, being only the daughter of an ill-paid pedagogue. But only the extremely ignorant asked so simple a question. Our considerate Constitution has provided that no Parliament shall sit more than seven years, and our combative political habits are so steady in their operation, that practically an appeal to the good will of the people is made between every three and four. A general election, it is well understood, is one of the great sources of wealth to the nation. Taunton has always stoutly insisted upon having its fair

share of the imperial largesse; and schoolmaster Shoreham was sensible man enough to have the very most he could get out of the local plunder. "Shoreham never votes under a hundred," local agents would tell the canvassing candidate. "It is no use calling on him till the very last. We will give it him if we want him; but we shall know better about that a little later."

One side or the other, however, always "wanted" him, and the humpbacked schoolmaster counted upon an annuity of twenty-five pounds for the term of his natural life, arising out of the election contests, and paid, as it were, by a direct provision of the State, with far more certainty than he counted upon the quarterly payments from the parents of what he used to call his "parcel of good-for-nothing idle young vagabonds." Pretty, coquettish Jessie Shoreham! Is it not pleasant to think that your becoming pink bonnet-strings were paid for by that greatest and most revered of all

human entities, the grand old British Constitution?

But there came a time when the pink bonnet-strings had to be exchanged for black ones, and the good-for-nothing idle young vagabonds suddenly found themselves most agreeably released for awhile from their lessons. The schoolbooks were closed, and poor humpbacked Shoreham's name was struck off the register, and the next time the candidates for the sweet voices of Taunton asked if Shoreham's vote had been secured, and if he wanted the same big price as before, they were told that he had himself gone to a house in which no amount of bribery will gain a man a seat. The choir lost a valuable baritone, and Jessie her only Taunton relative.

They are a kindly set of people there and thereabouts, and they would have managed to do something among them for the pretty orphan, had not a sister of the deceased suddenly appeared on the scene where she had rarely appeared before, and, with

her husband, offered to give Jessie house and home. They were very simple folks, though the husband seemed the simpler of the two. Jessie knew all about them, though she had seen her aunt but twice before, and one of the times was on the occasion of her mother's death, a period so remote and coming so early on in her own little life as to have left but a faint impression on her mind. But she did remember Aunt Mary and her uncle Roger Barfoot, and also hearing that the former was supposed to have married rather wilfully, and, as the phrase is, even among that sort of people as among their betters, beneath her.

Roger Barfoot was a small farmer, living near Dipleydale, which everybody has heard of as being near to the finest coast scenery of the extreme south-west of England. He had not much to offer to the lass, he said, in his blunt way, but she was own kith and kin to his good woman, and she was free of such as he had, poor as it was, and

maybe not like what Jessie had been accustomed to. But he understood from his good woman, that her brother, Master Shoreham, had left no more behind him than would see him decently buried; and if Jessie did not go back with him to Dipleydale, he did not see what else she was to do. One thing he did not intend, or, at least, his good woman said *she* did not intend, and that was just the same thing—they did not intend Jessie to go out to service. No Shoreham, nor Barfoot either, had ever done that, and was not going to do. For the rest, he was quite ready to hear the good folks of Taunton, now that they had heard him.

The good folks of Taunton had very little to say. They would be very sorry to lose such a pretty face from among them as Jessie; but flesh and blood were flesh and blood, and if Mr. and Mrs. Barfoot thought it their duty to offer her a home, it was plainly Jessie's duty to accept it, and the duty of Taunton to tell her so; which it did.

It was a hard leave-taking. I do not know that Jessie Shoreham had any very staunch or dearly-loved friends of her own age in Taunton, but she had a great many very pleasant acquaintances, and she had none at all whither she was going, and from all accounts there would be few or none to be had. Aunt Mary was five-and-fifty, and Uncle Barfoot must have been eight years older still, and they had no children or young thing about them. She was going into an unknown land which was certainly no land of promise.

She went, however, and the reality was in this instance, what it very rarely is where dread or aversion is the feeling with which it is approached, worse than the anticipation. It was not that the home to which she had been suddenly removed was deficient in comfort; indeed, it could more than endure comparison with the one which she had so suddenly quitted. The real contrast which troubled her was the loneliness of the one compared with the liveli-

ness of the other. It was the old contrast between town and country, which in female eyes, and especially of the less educated sort, rarely, if ever, seems to tell in favour of the latter.

Roger Barfoot had but a small farm and a small homestead, but the first was well cultivated, and the second was neat and almost a pattern of rural comfort. It contained, of course, but one simple sitting-room, but this was always in use, at least from the moment that the niece came among them. Overhead were two rooms, one of which had been done up and specially prepared for her arrival. Scrupulously nice and clean, and quite large enough for her wants, it had from its little window a view such as is gained from the corridors or terraces of but few stately seats even in lordly England. Nor was Jessie dead to this advantage. Indeed, Roger and his wife soon began to complain that she appeared to be too keenly alive to it, so much time did she spend in her own room,

looking, as she averred, at the beautiful view of wood, hill, stream, and sea all combined. But even an eye with a finer sense, and a heart with a still larger love for Nature's choicest favours than Jessie Shoreham's, will weary, if not tire, of them all, if they be not occasionally exchanged for the glow of human faces, the noise of human tongues, and the play of human interests. Jessie loved the sunset, knew when it would commence, and patiently watched its dying moments. But not the less would she like to have heard the rattle of the Exeter coach, or seen the big lumbering omnibus bring in its last batch of travellers from the express train. Oh! the sound of that distant cascade! She could never be sick of listening to it, she was sure. But for all that, was it unnatural that she would have liked to see again some of the bright young faces, and hear again some of the complimentary things, she used to see and hear in Taunton market-place under the shining round

clock, when busy Saturdays came pleasantly round?

But the nearest cluster of houses to Roger Barfoot's farm was the little village of Dipleldale, and even it was a good mile and more away. It had no market-days proper of its own, and every time that Jesse contrived to visit it, she found it duller and more dead-alive than before. Even Sunday brought no alleviation to the monotonous colour of Jessie's new existence. The church which her uncle and aunt attended twice every Sunday with unfailing regularity, was not down in Dipleldale, but away on the moor, further inland. It was a long, weary pull, especially the last bare quarter of a mile, from Netwold Farm to where Uskmoor church stood, with its square squat tower looking blankly to all the four quarters of the compass, and though very silent, not seeming particularly to point towards heaven. It was the spot to which the units of human life scattered over the high broad undulating moorland

regularly one day in seven conventionally converged. It was not a very intelligent or in any other way striking congregation; and its pastor, though somewhat more intelligent, was scarcely more striking than his flock. He matched with the squat tower and the bare moorlands. He was not a man of large or lofty aspirations, fertile in flowers of cultivated rhetoric, or prone to limit and rigidly define the doctrines of which he was supposed to be the expounder. But he was a sane, sensible man; and when he perceived that a large per-centage of his congregation had dropped off to sleep, he woke them up by quickly bringing to a close the sermon, which might with equal appropriateness have been concluded at any other portion of it. Then the good folks trudged into the open air, shook hands all round with a succession of jerks from the elbow, inquired after each other's health briefly, but with an un-failing introduction into the inquiry of each other's christian names; then broke up, and diverged again into the week-day unit life.

Poor Jessie! This was very different from Sunday at Taunton, when the sacred but withal not unmerry Sabbath morning was ushered in by the ringing of the sweet bells of the beautiful tower, and when everybody knowing everybody else entered into a pleasant emulation of bright looks and brighter finery. There was no well-directed choir to make church-going agreeable now. At Taunton she had to traverse two or three streets crowded with nodding and smirking acquaintances, and then she found herself in her accustomed seat, the conscious object of many male and every female eye for the first minute or two after her arrival. Now she had to trudge over stony path and irregular ridge for more than half-an-hour to arrive at Uskmoor in a most unbecoming state of perspiration, and where it did not much matter in what state she arrived. She really could not have brought herself to care much for Uskmoor admiration, had she happened to excite it. But the truth must be told ; the Uskmoor folks were

not a very enthusiastic, and still less were they a very critical set of people; and had Jessie Shoreham been their sort of beauty, which she unquestionably was not, she would not have created much flutter in the general bosom. Smiles, and nods, and signs, and coquettish greetings in transept, aisle, or porch—these were things of the dear irrevocable Taunton past. All days at Netwold Farm were dull and dreary, but Sundays were the dullest and dreariest days of all. She had to walk far more than she liked, and she had all the walking for nothing.

Still Jessie could not help feeling grateful to her excellent aunt and uncle who, without any motive but the charity of blood, and with nothing to gain by their timely generosity, had taken her to their home. It was an awfully stupid home, but where was there another? And now that she was there and had been there for some little time, did they not still do everything in their power to make matters pleasant to

her? Roger Barfoot was a regular hard-working farmer; and with Aunt Mary, "doing something," as she invariably termed it, was a perfect passion. She had worked so hard all her life that any temporary interference with the course of her labours would have been as fatal, I verily believe, as a stoppage of the circulation of her blood. But they were more considerate of Jessie than of themselves. They both knew that she had been accustomed to lead a do-nothing sort of life, and neither wished to impose upon her all at once the burthen of a sudden change of habits, in addition to that of a sudden and sorrowful change of scene.

But over and above all this, it was with them both a point of honour, that no work, at least no work that could be said to partake of the character of drudgery, should be thrust upon the niece whom they had gone to Taunton and fetched thence in her orphanage to Netwold Farm. Nobody should ever say, sturdy old Roger affirmed, that he

had made anything out of poor Shoreham's child. He had taken her in, and who so likely, when somebody or other was called upon to see to the poor creature. But he was not going to turn his friendliness to profit, or even to get back out of her as much as he had given.

She must have had a good deal of time on her hands, you will think. A large portion of it she spent, as we have seen, at the little window from which, as from a high mountain top, she could see all the wonders of nature and the glory thereof. But it was not to be expected that she could sit so long and long even afront that various panorama, with no other companion but her own unaided thoughts. Poor Jessie's education had been too limited, though she was a schoolmaster's daughter, and her experience too brief and confined, for her to find in sunrise and sunset sufficient food for her heart any more than for her eyes.

Ever and anon she made excursions to Dipleyle, a mile and more down the

valley, or more strictly speaking, the ravine, through which the Dipp vagrantly and precipitously tumbles to the sea. But just where the Dipp ends its wooded course, and plashes out more broadly before being sucked in by the ocean, is the village of Dippleymouth, own brother to Dippleydale, both in age, size, and quietness. The two are not half a mile apart, though to him who has to make the ascent from the lower to the higher it seems a terribly long meandering half mile. At both there is, or there was, a stationer's shop, each belonging to the same enterprising individual, who had originally wandered into these parts with the noble but rather Quixotic idea of conducting and publishing a weekly newspaper, and otherwise satisfying the literary cravings of the neighbourhood. But he had soon found that their craving for pins and needles was greater than for leading articles; and with that admirable adaptability to circumstances, which is the main superiority of the lower order of man over the higher

order of brute, Mr. Jabez Britton laid in a stock of the above necessary commodities, and instead of devoting himself to the higher walks of literature, contented himself with such a dedication to the lower as is implied in the sale of note-paper and black-lead pencils.

But Mr. Jabez Britton's enterprise did not end here. It had been part of his original scheme to found a lending library, and this portion of his scheme he saw no reason to abandon. He very soon discovered that it would not be very remunerative, but as he had already purchased books for the purpose, he thought he had better turn them to some, however small, a profit, than to none at all. Accordingly, he divided them in half, keeping one moiety at Dipleysdale and the other at Dipleymouth.

Novels formed almost exclusively the catalogue of Britton's library; and had it been otherwise, it would have been still more unremunerative than it was already. Assuredly, Jessie Shoreham, for one, would

not have been so assiduous a patron. The heavy romances which she carried away with her, with infinite addition to the toil of her journeyings, from Dipleydale or Dipleymouth to Netwold Farm, formed the entire staple of her society when, in her little room, she grew wearied of gazing at the clouds, the woods, and the sea. Not unoften, though only of an evening, she had to read them aloud to Uncle Roger, who, though he confessed he liked the newspaper better, especially when there was any assize intelligence in it, liked to be read to by pretty Jessie whilst he smoked his long pipe, and so prepared himself for his long slumbers.

But though Jessie made no difficulty about reading aloud to dear kind Uncle Roger, she infinitely preferred having her romances all to herself up in the little room, where she could devour them as rapidly, or linger over them as long, as she liked. They were a great comfort to her, these novels from Britton's. Indeed she did not know what she should have done without them. They

did not tell her of things altogether like her Taunton life, but they were a sort of link between her Taunton life and her present dreary one. Indeed they dealt with people, and things, and scenes, much grander than any in or about Taunton. They created for her a delightful world in the midst of her dull one. Alas! they were preparing her to behave as foolishly and perhaps as fatally as the most beautiful and most betrayed of any of their heroines!

Oh, my sister and brother novelists! Does it ever occur to you what a tremendous power, with consequent responsibility, you wield over the morals of the time? The old teachers are largely dispossessed of their authority. The pulpit no longer has a monopoly of instruction. You have ousted the preachers, and you are standing aloft in their stead. Have a care that you preach the right sermons! It is for boys and virgins that you mostly write. Inflamm not their imaginations too hotly; or if you needs must so inflame them, inflame them

with a passion for the simple, the pathetic, the pure, and, most of all, for the true. You talk to them of human nature. Pray leave them their instincts of reverence and of pity. Above all, lead them not to ridicule, to scorn, or to disbelieve. Better be dull than disloyal. Yet no such cruel alternative is offered you. Ruth standing amid the corn will interest ages unborn, when the adultresses of to-day's sensation stories will be as forgotten as the name of her who is herself remembered only because she tempted Joseph in vain.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAIDEN'S RESOLVE.

THE storm had passed away, but everybody might have guessed that with it had passed away the soul of the summer. Again there was a perfectly cloudless sky. The sea was sparkling and but mildly ruffled. The streams, though swollen, were glittering with sunlight. But the rain had fallen on the woods, not to freshen their foliage, but to hasten its fall. The air was clear and balmy; but in it was a piercing quality which told that autumn had at last declared for the side of winter, and that the cold spears of the latter would soon be coming down the gorges.

Still, how soft, how bright, how beautiful!

Jessie looked forth from her little window, and thought how the prospect from it had never been so lovely before as on this shining October evening.

"He will not come now," she had been saying to herself all the afternoon. "He cannot come now; and if he did, how could I go and meet him? I should be wet through to the skin, and Aunt Mary would know all about it to-morrow morning when she saw my clothes. There is no chance of the storm ending, and its taking up now. He will not come, and I shall not be able to see him, and I did want so much to see him and tell him that it must all end, and that I cannot meet him any more."

Now all was changed. She would be able to meet him, after all. Not only the storm itself, but all traces of it had disappeared, and Jessie sat at the window, excited and expectant, but striving to be calm. She had need of all her presence of mind.

She had come to a resolution, and had been nervously thirsting for the moment

when she could carry it out. Hence, when the storm burst over Dipleysdale about three o'clock, she had been plunged into despondency, from feeling that, though her resolution would remain the same under all circumstances, the opportunity for acting upon it must necessarily be postponed, and that she would have to live and go about for days and days, perhaps for weeks and weeks more, under the consciousness that she had behaved most unwisely if not wrongly, without being able to get rid of the self-reproof by finally undoing all that she had hitherto done. Who has not experienced that painful relaxation of the nerves which takes place whenever they have been tightly strung for the execution of some set but disagreeable purpose, and the occasion for the execution, deemed to be close at hand, is indefinitely delayed?

Now, thank Heaven, it was not to be delayed. It would, after all, present itself this very night. The sky was clear, and the sun was setting only in his own golden

shroud. There wanted but the falling of the night, and the passing of four brief hours, and then Jessie would set all right again and free herself from a thralldom in which she ought never to have been bound.

But the four hours which seemed so brief, when looked at by her imagination, as it fixed itself on the concerted moment and spot of meeting, down in the woods hard by the little stone bridge that spanned the Dipp, seemed anything but brief as she sat in her room waiting for them to pass. They moved away with provokingly measured regularity. They would pass, it was certain, but why could they not pass more quickly?

Jessie was compelled at last to spend them in most dangerous society. Her novels interested her not this evening. She had a romance of her own of, to her, far more thrilling interest. Its written records were few; but such as they were, she brought them forth and read them over once more at the window. There were but five letters, and three of them but short

ones, merely naming days and hours of meeting. Two there were of greater length, and one of these we have seen before. It was the one written at Fleetwood Manse, though it bore no such address. They were all signed simply "Arthur."

Yet how Jessie had loved these letters! What messengers of joy they had been to her, whenever she had found them lying for her at the Post-office, at Dipleydale! They had made her a heroine in her own sight, the centre of thrilling incidents, the very subject for a story still more powerful than all Britton's three volume novels.

She would give them back to him to-night. And with them she would return the two or three little trinkets which he had with difficulty forced upon her acceptance. She would bid him adieu for ever, and make the sacrifice which she was sure that duty demanded from her.

She could not bring herself to regret what had occurred, resolved though she was to bring its incidents to an absolute

close to-night. She could not regret having received those letters. They had been such a pleasure, such an excitement to her, in the desert of her dull, desolate life. She was rather sorry she had not been still more firm in objecting to take the little trinkets. But no matter. In a few more hours it would be as though she had never received them.

One thing, however, she did regret. She might not be sorry that she had received those five letters, but she was more than troubled when she was forced to remember the five that she herself had written in return. She coloured, alone though she was, as she thought of them. But, again, no matter. He would return them to her, no doubt, just as she was going to return him his. And then she would destroy them—tear them up, and throw their fragments into the Dipp when it was turbid and strong, and they would float away into the sea, and there would be an end of it all. She would be very miserable. She was quite prepared

to be very miserable. But she would not be so miserable as if she consented to do what he asked her to do now. She would be miserable, but she would have done her duty.

What was it that he was asking her to do? Nothing, according to his own account, but what he might reasonably demand of her, if she loved him. Something, according to her view, which he would never ask her to do, if he loved her. He was asking her to leave her home, not only without her uncle's and aunt's consent, but even without their knowledge. This was the point between them.

Why not marry her with their consent? She was quite sure they would give it. She would answer for that. She had done as he had wished her all along, and had never breathed a word to them about her acquaintance with him, or how it had been formed. She was sorry now that she had done so, but so it was. But she could not leave Netwold without their knowledge.

That was quite out of the question. Why not tell Uncle Roger and Aunt Mary all? They would be very angry with her at first, she knew. But when they saw how nice he was, and how fond of her, they would forgive her, and give their consent to anything she asked. And even if they refused it—why, then, she promised she would marry him without their consent, marry him at Uskmoor Church, or Dipleydale, or Dipleymouth, or Taunton, or anywhere.

Simple, foolish, incautious, naughty, but at heart virtuous Jessie!

This was her view of the case. The following was his. Why not come away without saying a word to the old folks, who would be sure to make all sorts of difficulties, and make things disagreeable to him, and give no end of bother? They would not understand how it was that Jessie and he came to know each other. He did not hide from her that there was great difference of rank between him and her, still more between him and them. Had her own parents

been alive, who were, as she had told him, superior people to her uncle and her aunt, it would have been different. They would have understood it all. But this old couple up in the hills, farmer and farmer's wife, would be stupid, and obstinate, and unmanageable. To tell the truth, he did not want to have too much to do with them. It was not as if they had been Jessie's own parents. She must understand that he would of course raise her to his own rank, and that she, with her beauty, was more than worthy of being so raised. But he could not possibly raise *them*. They would give her their blessing when the thing was done and told to them, and that was surely enough. She must conquer her scruples, and come away without saying a word to either of them.

This she had already by letter resolutely refused to do, and he was coming to-night to take her refusal in person, and to hear from her own lips that they must make an end and part for ever.

Was the making an end very bitter to her?—very, very bitter? In itself, and apart from all other circumstances, I question if it would have been extremely so? Supposing that any other form of excitement was to follow, I think Jessie would have found the sacrifice easier to bear. But nothing would follow. Nothing but the old, dull, unbroken, monotonous life, such as she had been leading before she had known him. Duty, a keen sense of duty, would have been almost enough to counterbalance the pain of sacrifice, if the sacrifice was not about to leave her so terribly stranded and alone.

Did she not love him, then? The question reads like a simple one, but for all that it is not too easy to answer. Hearts resemble soils, and are quite as various in their qualities. Some, without any preparation, seem ready to produce at once a rich harvest of passion. Others, only after long and diversified cultivation, after being turned over and experimented on and tried

with lighter crops, end by yielding large measure to the sower. Perhaps Jessie was of these last. Certainly she was not of the first.

The surface only of her heart had been scratched, and she had yielded of her affections accordingly. She liked him, unquestionably. Perhaps she loved him. But she certainly was not desperately and hopelessly in love with him. He was handsome, and fascinating, and strong, and was above her in station. She loved him just enough not to be able to resist him altogether. But she did not love him sufficiently not to be able to resist him at all. A very material difference.

Did he really and truly love her? At first she had thought so, and this had probably made her love him as far as she did love him. It had certainly been the cause of her loving to be courted by him. Indeed it had been to her the soul of the entire incident. Had she been still satisfied that he really and truly loved her, he would

have had more power over her than, luckily for her, he now had.

She did not think now that he really and truly loved her. The discovery was not of that painful nature which it would have been had she arrived at the stage of loving him quite independently of his love for her. But she had not. And the discovery was proportionately docked of its bitterness.

Nevertheless, the discovery was not pleasant. It was mortifying. But it nerved her for action, and operated as a most useful ally to duty. If he really loved her, why did he let her go rather than face her uncle and aunt before their marriage? She felt confident that she was right in her refusal. English girls are usually more innocent than many wise people imagine. But what with association, and the opinions they hear, and that strange half-knowing, half-unknowing sort of thing which we call instinct, they feel that it would be wrong, terribly wrong, to commit themselves to the care of one man, even though swearing that

he is going to lead them straight to the altar or the registrar, and though they have but the vaguest and most indefinite notion of what will happen should he end by taking them to neither. Let us thank a dexterous providence which has made women thus far cautious without making them very knowing.

Still, though she had failed terribly of her duty hitherto, and was now about to do nothing but what it was her duty to do, let us not be too hard upon poor Jessie. She really was making a serious sacrifice. It had been very sweet and pleasant to meet him in the Dipleldale woods; and it would have been very pleasant to have gone away with him and married him, and been taken by him about the big world instead of sticking up there at Netwold Farm alone, and with no prospect of a change for the better. She was already fond of him, and she had no doubt that she would have grown to love him immensely, when she saw that he loved her immensely too. But there was

no hope now of anything of the kind. It was all over, or would be all over in a few hours, and then she would be as desolate as ever.

The sun had set. The very afterglow was dying out. The twilight was sweet and clear. But the air was growing chill. She closed the little window and walked towards her chest of drawers. She looked hot and flushed, but she felt cold and pale. If it were only half-past nine!

CHAPTER V.

A MAN'S RESOLVE.

"JESSIE didn't seem to want to read to me to-night," Roger Barfoot was saying to his wife. Jessie had kissed them both, and taken her candle, and gone upstairs, pleading that she felt rather tired. "I don't know how it is, but she's not all right lately, somehow. Something's amiss."

"I tell you what it is, Roger," answered his wife; "I tell you what it is. You spoil her, and that's what's amiss."

"Nay, nay," he answered, striking the bowl of his pipe against the top hob of the grate, in which their first fire of the autumn was dying out, and scattering the grey tobacco-ash over the smouldering

embers. "Nay, nay, I don't see how it can be that, seeing as how I think I've treated her pretty much the same ever since she came to us; and I never knew her not want to read to me before. It was the book that was not very interesting, maybe. It did seem rather a dull 'un, though they're none o' them very lively to me. I like the 'size news best, I do."

"And a much more reasonable and sensible sort of taste, too," said the old woman, "though I can't say as I care much for either o' them. I think the Bible and the 'Pilgrim's Progress' is a deal more interesting than both, and a very deal wholesomer and more to the purpose."

"I don't see that, Mary. I've nothing to say agin the Bible. That's always understood. But I do think that last case, where the old woman poisoned her grandchildren, and which 'll be coming on the very next 'sizes, more exciting like than the Delectable Mountains."

"Well, tastes differ, Roger. But I don't

think there can be much difference of taste about Jessie's conduct to-night. You didn't like it, and I didn't like it neither."

"The lass was tired. Didn't you hear her say as much?"

"Tired! What's she tired about! Were it nothing but being tired, I should be right glad to hear her say so. I only wish she had anything to tire her. Had she been scrubbing pans all day, like some folk I could mention——"

"There, there, my dear! It's no use talking about scrubbing pans. Shoreham's child shall do no scrubbing of pans in my house. Nobody shall ever say that I took Shoreham's child from Taunton when she were an orphan like, and brought her to Netwold and set her to scrub pans."

"Now, now, Roger, do be reasonable. Who wants her to scrub pans? And when has she ever done anything of the kind? I'm sure no lady of the land could do less in the way o' work than she does."

"And I don't want her to," answered

Roger, rather equivocally as to the sense. But as his sentiments were so well known to his wife, she understood him quite as well as if he had been grammatical. "She sews, and stitches, and darns, and puts on the buttons, and counts the linen, and does all that I'll ever agree for Shoreham's child to be set doing."

"Well, well, you know best, Roger."

"I do about that, my dear; though I never professed to be very knowing about most things, and 'll give in to you at all times. Always saving that."

"I don't want the girl to be set to do rough work. She'd only spoil it if she tried. But when you yourself say she's queer—and she's queer enough, off and on—I think it's time to ask why. Why didn't she want to read to 'you to-night? She used to want. Why didn't she want now?"

"She'll read to me again to-morrow night, hard enough. The book was dull, my dear, I tell you."

“It wasn’t the book as was dull, Roger. It’s herself as is dull. The place is dull, and you’re dull, and I’m dull, and it’s all dull together; and well it may be to a young thing as sticks her head cram-full of them fond stories, and lives in a fly-by-night sort of an atmosphere, where nothing happens as really does happen, and where everybody has as much money as is ever convenient to them, and nobody works for it, no more than Jessie does herself, more’s the pity. That’s what’s amiss with her, and now you know.”

Aunt Mary had unburthened her mind by this long speech. Roger had himself commenced the conversation by remarking that something was amiss with Jessie of late, and he could not be so inconsistent as to finish it by maintaining that the lass was all right. Indeed, even as it was, he had contradicted himself a little; and had the old woman been as passionately fond of verbal victory as some of her sex, she might have pressed the contradiction home.

But she was a worthy wife and spared him. He felt her generosity; and also feeling that there was a good deal of truth in what she said, he contented himself with rising from his straight-backed chair, laying down his pipe on the chimney-piece, and saying—

“ Well, well, my dear, let's go to bed. I'm tired, whoever's not. That rain took me unawares, and I didn't get all that bit o' thatching done, with all my staying out so late and going on at it till dark.”

“ If you'd only have got somebody to help you do it, instead o' half killing yourself, Roger, as you're always doing, it'd be better. You're not as strong as you used to be, whatever you may think.”

“ Maybe I'm not, though I trust I've a deal o' work left in me yet.”

Half-an-hour later, and Jessie stole silently out of the house, where the two old people lay soundly sleeping. She had had no occasion to dress hurriedly, and accordingly she was fittingly prepared for the

expedition on which she was bound. Indeed, she had given no slight pains to her toilette, moved thereto, no doubt, by the feminine desire to look her very best in her lover's eyes at the moment that he was going to resign possession of her. There was no moon, but there were plenty of stars, and the night was clear. Accustomed to her presence in the dusky hours, he would be able to distinguish whether she were dressed carefully or not; and her pride co-operated with her vanity to induce her to let him see that she was the former. She was in a flutter of excitement. But for all that, her bonnet-strings had never received from her closer attention, nor had she ever adjusted the collar of her cloak with more critical pains.

She got clear of the cottage and of the farmyard without any difficulty, and soon found herself in the moorland road, which a little further on bifurcated into two paths, the left of which bore gradually away to Dipleydale, and the right plunged

straight into the woods and to the Dipp, and so conducted by the torrent to Dippley-mouth.

She chose this last, and was soon among the foliage of the trees, from which ever and anon a heavy drop of water, stayed by the broad leaves, would fall and plash upon her bonnet. The path would have been more moist and slippery had it been less stony and less precipitous. Several times, nevertheless, she nearly lost her footing, now from one cause, and now from the other. She found that she was hurrying along most unwisely, and indeed, unnecessarily. The hour of meeting was a quarter past ten. She would be in plenty of time.

Now she could distinctly hear the rush of the stream. Nearer and nearer. It was no longer the rush of a stream, but the roar of a torrent. It was tremendously swollen by the rain which had fallen during the storm, and it was tearing madly along as if for dear life, and to make way for the flood of water behind that had yet to come.

How awful! The stars shone clear through the openings of the foliage. The trees themselves were still; and the torrent seemed to have become the only voice, the mind, the passionate soul of the woods; and it was shaking them with its sublime and voluble frenzy.

She paused. She was not far from the little stone bridge where she was to meet him. Was he sure to be there? Much as she dreaded the interview, she devoutly trusted that he would. She had met him at the same place before more than once, but never at the same hour. She did not like the hour to-night; and she had consented to meet him at such an hour on this occasion, only because she was so anxious to see him, and because it would be their last interview, and he had not given her time to write and fix an earlier one. She had received his last note only the day before yesterday, and in it he had told her that he should be travelling till he saw her, and had given her no address through

which any remonstrance as to the hour could reach him. She had never met him at latest save in twilight before. But what matter? It was the last meeting. She was going to say adieu to him, and for ever.

She was still standing perfectly at rest. How different were her feelings now from what they had been on other occasions when she had been on her way to see him! Then, as now, her footsteps had been clandestine. Then, however, the reproaches which her conscience had addressed to her for their clandestine character, had been partly silenced or overborne by the joyous palpitation of her heart. Now the reproaches which her conscience should still perhaps have addressed to her, were silenced entirely by the self-flattering sentiment that she was bound on a painful errand dictated by duty.

Again she was on her way. One turn more of the stream and she would be close to the little stone bridge, and he

ought to be there. She made the turn, and he was standing before her. Instead of waiting, he had come a little up stream to meet her.

He did what he had never done before, save in parting from her. He put his arms round her at once, and was about to kiss her fondly, but she half withdrew from his embrace, and half pushed him away from her, though not with violence, and then stretched out her hand to him. He said something, but she could not hear him for the noise of the water.

"I fear we shall not hear each other, Jessie, darling," he said, raising his voice almost into a shout. They were walking towards the little stone bridge as he did so, as though, that having always been the conventional spot for their meeting, they must go to it again this evening, despite his having come to meet her higher up.

The noise grew louder still as they approached the bridge, for the torrent narrowed before plunging under it, and

then leaped over a sharp ledge of rock and fell, at first a mass of boiling, hissing spray, to become further on a deep, dark, swift, hurrying stream of foam-flecked sweeping water.

"We shall not hear each other a bit just here," again he shouted; "let us cross the bridge and go a little further down, where the stream is quieter."

The woodland path along which Jessie had come, and which, it will be remembered, led down to Dippleymouth, did so by crossing the little stone bridge, and following the stream along its other bank. On this side the path broke short, or was continued only along a strip of broken rock and sward, which was difficult enough even in broad daylight.

"Very well," answered Jessie, shouting back. "You go first."

He did as she asked him, for the bridge was not broad enough for two to go abreast. As she followed him across, she put her hand a little above her heart and pressed

it against her dress. She was feeling if the five letters and the little trinkets she was going to return to him were safe in her bosom. Yes; it was all right—they were still there.

He stopped when they had got sufficiently down the stream for them to be out of the overpowering sound of the fall. They still could hear it plainly enough, but it no longer prevented their voices from being easily audible to each other. He turned, and she halted.

Again he seemed as if he was about to embrace her. Again she stepped back, and almost raised her hand. But, seeing the first movement, he desisted in time to render the second unnecessary.

“May I not kiss you, Jessie dear? It is so long since I saw you.”

“It will be longer before you see me again,” she answered.

She was not a mighty dame, instructed either by grand experiences of her own, or by the utterances of a metropolitan stage.

She was only the simple product of Taunton and Dipleydale. It is true she had read a great many fine speeches in Mr. Britton's novels, made by young ladies to their lovers; but she forgot all about these now. She was too much in earnest, and, therefore, too natural to be anything but unsophisticated Jessie Shoreham. She thought she was doing the right thing, and in that sense a heroic thing. But her utterances were not likely to be especially heroic. They were far more likely to be a little petulant, even from the commencement. She did not like the sacrifice she was making, and she did not feel in a very good humour with the man who was compelling her to make it.

"It will be longer before you see me again," she said accordingly.

"Nonsense ! Jessie. I hope it will never be so long again."

"But it will; and that you'll soon find out."

"You are cross with me, pet. What is it? Tell me."

"I am not cross with you in the least. Cross, indeed! What have I to be cross about?"

"That is precisely what I want to know. Here, I have come right from one end of England to the other on purpose to see you, and you give me no better reception than this. I think it is rather hard."

"I am very sorry you should have had the trouble of coming."

"It is not the *trouble* of coming," he replied, persuasively. "You know that, Jessie, well enough. I would have come ten times, a million times, the distance, for the pleasure of being near you. It is the coming for the purpose of receiving so unkind a welcome that I meant."

"I would have prevented you from coming if you had only given me time to do so. But you gave me no address, and I received your letter only the day before yesterday."

"I am very glad I did not give you time, in that case," he replied, throwing a tone of

chivalrous gaiety into his voice. "But why would you have prevented me from coming?"

"I would have prevented you from coming at this hour, at any rate. You had no right to mention so late an hour."

"Upon my word, Jessie dearest, I could not help it. I have only just arrived, and I knew I should arrive only at this time. If you had not met me to-night, I should have had to wait till to-morrow evening, for you, yourself, told me that you never could meet me before sundown. You know you did, Jessie; now, didn't you?"

She knew she had told him so. And she blushed in the dark woods, remembering how it was she who had first feared the light of day, and the risk of familiar eyes, and the gossip of familiar tongues, and had proposed twilight hours of meeting.

"And I could not wait till morrow," he went on, "a whole day, nearly twenty-four hours, without seeing you. *You* might not have cared," he added, with reproachful tenderness; *you* might not have cared,

Jessie; but to me it would have seemed an eternity."

"It's no use talking to me like that; for you know I have come only to say good-bye to you, and to tell you that——"

"I know you will tell me nothing of the kind, pretty one."

"I have already told it you by letter, and I meant what I wrote, and I mean it still; and I should not have come here to-night at all except to tell it you with my own lips, and not to seem unkind by refusing to see you once more, if only to say good-bye."

Whatever may have been in her heart as she uttered these last words, he took courage from hearing them. Such kindness is to a man always a strong ground of hope, an augury of success.

"So kind of you, darling; so, so kind. And I beg you a thousand, thousand pardons, for dragging you out at this hour. But wont you forgive me? I could not wait. I was dying to see you."

She made no reply. But the fact of her

being there was proof enough that she pardoned him quite sufficiently, he thought, for his purpose. So, as she still remained silent, he continued—

“And you came here to-night intending to say good-bye to me for ever?”

“I did, and I intend it still.”

“No, no, Jessie! You intended it, but you will not do it. It is impossible! You cannot mean that you are going to abandon me.”

There was a slight shiver among the trees, and the voice of the torrent for a moment seemed to swell into a growl, as if Nature shuddered, and would fain annihilate the last-born but loftiest of her products, when, in the face of all the rest, he desecrates the noble passion which she has given to him alone, with a lie!

“It is not I who abandon you,” she answered.

“Who is it, then?” he asked.

He wanted her to answer, “It is you who abandon me.” But she was a maiden, and had too much maidenly feeling for that.

He was disappointed that he had not surprised her into the avowal. It was necessary to trip her up in some other way.

"Nobody else proposes to separate us. Heaven knows we shall never be separated by wish of mine. I love you, Jessie, darling, as much as ever I did, and I want to have you with me more than ever."

"It is all no use," she answered, sadly; "and you know it is no use, Arthur. I am very sorry I have ever met you at all. It was all my own fault, I know. I ought not to have allowed you to speak to me, when you first did so in these woods. At least, I ought not to have answered you."

He did not interrupt her as long as she was saying either what was so true that he felt he could not persuade her to the contrary, or what he could not turn to very dexterous account.

"And when I had done so wrong as to let you speak to me, and to answer, I ought to have told my aunt at once."

"Have you done so?" he asked, quickly.

"No," she said, "I have not. I promised you I would not, and I have kept my promise. I would break my promise now though, if I could do any good by telling her; for I feel somehow that it would be my duty rather to break my promise than to deceive her any more. I cannot argue it with you, but I feel that. It would do no good, however, to tell her anything about it now. It would only make her miserable. And as I will positively never meet you again, what does it matter? It is I who have done wrong, and I must bear the consequences."

If she could only have looked into his heart as he listened to this, her simple accusation! If she could only have looked into his face! That would have been something. For even there she would have read what he could not hide, a consciousness that she had placed herself in his power already, and a determination to press his power ruthlessly to the utmost. But though there was such beautiful simplicity

and truthfulness in the confession, there was so much penitence besides, that she could not raise her eyes to look at his, but hung her poor little head for shame as she spoke.

"But there will be no consequences to bear, my dear girl," he exclaimed. "No sad ones, at any rate. You talk as if I was going to desert you."

Again he paused, the dastard hoping that she would answer tearfully, "And so you are." But again she refused the basely held-out bait. There was nothing for him to do but to go on.

"As if I had made your acquaintance in a hurry, and now worse than in a hurry I was going to cease it! On the contrary, my darling, our life together is only just beginning. Indeed it is not yet begun. We will be united, never to be separated. I will love you, see to you, and always seek to amuse you. Nothing shall stop us. I am rich, and Jessie darling, to you I should always be generous. No more dull days, my pretty one. We will go everywhere,

see everything, and have every pleasure that life can give us. And all this, together. Do not dash my hopes. I love you, and you have told me more than once that I have won your love. Have you taken it back, and to whom have you given it?"

She must have been made of very unmaidenly stuff indeed, if his ardent words—words too into which he had thrown a tone of earnestness, for he *was* in earnest in a sense and from one point of view—had altogether failed to move her. But they moved her only whilst she heard them, or just so much longer as she remained silent before attempting to reply.

"You know that I have taken back nothing that I ever gave."

"Do you love me still, Jessie?"

"I shall not answer the question," she answered, "but I am quite sure that you do not love me."

"But I tell you that I do. There was a time when you did not hesitate to answer the question and to assure me that you did love me."

"Because I believed that you loved me. You told me so, and I had no reason to think otherwise, as I have now."

"In what have I changed?" he asked, as though she were grievously wronging him. "I asked you to pass your days with me, I ask you still."

"But I misunderstood you then. I do not misunderstand you now. I never meant to leave home before we were—well, you know what I mean—and I never will. That is all about it."

"Before you were married, you mean?"

She made no answer. She felt too sure that he knew that he was right in his construction of the sentence which she had left unfinished.

"Then you stake our happiness," he said, "upon the question of half-an-hour. Your uncle and aunt would know as soon as ever you *were* married, and surely——"

She stamped her foot fretfully, so snapping short his sentence. "Enough, I will not talk of it. It is hateful to me. See!"

and she drew the little packet from her bosom. "Here are your letters and the ring and the locket you gave me. You will find them all in here—the ring and the locket and the five letters ; only five."

She held the little packet out to him.

"What do you want me to do with these?" he asked, innocently.

"To take them back, and to give me back my letters too."

"You foolish little Jessie. I prize your letters before all things. I hope I shall not have many more from you, or you many more from me. But the ring and the locket are only the beginning of really lovely things that I will shower on you all your life. Jessie, Jessie, I will not lose you!"

"Do you mean to marry me?" she asked, driven to desperation by words which excited her so.

"You know I do," he answered, quietly.

"But with my Aunt Mary's knowledge, and before I leave home?"

“Now, Jessie, how can you be so——”

“I will not listen to another word,” she said. “Take these letters. Take them, Arthur, I say you shall. I am determined you shall.”

He made no movement to receive them from her. She put them in the bend of his arm, and they fell to the ground. He did not pick them up; neither did she. But she went on breathlessly.

“And you will send me mine—to the post-office, as before—and then it will all be finished. And I hope you will be happy. But I never will see you again. And it will be no use writing any more, for I shall show anything you write to my aunt. Oh, what a fool I have been! And now good-bye. I must go, I really must go. If you do not choose to say good-bye to me, I must go without it.”

He caught at her dress and tried to stop her, but she persisted in her purpose. He begged of her to listen to him again, but

she would not. Again he caught at her dress, and again she broke away.

"No, no; good-bye. I really must go. Good-bye."

She was hurrying towards the little stone bridge, and he was obliged to take fast strides to keep up with her. Evidently she was in earnest.

A few seconds more and she would reach the bridge. He slipped round to the right, was there before her, and barred the way.

"Let me pass, Arthur! I insist upon going. This is cruel."

There was a sob in the middle of the last word. The tears were coming at last. He put up his hands to fondle her.

"Listen to me, Jessie—darling—pretty one—just a word—just——"

"No, no; good-bye. Let me pass; you have no right, you have——"

"It's no use, I see," he said, not to her, however, but aloud to himself. At the same time he wheeled right round and looked across the bridge, with his back, of course,

now turned towards her. But, as we have seen, so narrow was the bridge, it would have been idle for her to attempt to get past him.

Then he gave a loud whistle.

She had heard the words, "It's no use," and now she heard the whistle, and saw him looking across the bridge. She immediately concluded that the whistle would be answered from the direction in which he was looking. Terrified, she turned, and was going to run down the path in the direction of Dipleymouth; but she had scarcely done so before she found herself in somebody's extended arms, and suddenly all was darkness to her. Then there was yet another pair of hands upon her, and she felt herself lifted from the ground. She had tried to scream, but she knew somehow she had not succeeded. She heard only the roar of the torrent, and then she felt a rocking, downward motion, as though she were being tossed and borne away on it. And then both sense of motion and sound of torrent died out in her.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHANGE OF JOURNEY.

"GIVE her air now; she will not scream any more. Carefully! Bear away to the right; better follow me; just one minute."

He ran back to the spot where he had held his interview with her, and there stooped and groped along the ground.

"All right," he said, hastening back to them; "I have got what I wanted. On again, now."

He had gone back for the little packet containing the trinkets and the letters, and was putting them away carefully in his pocket.

But was this the man that had been talking to Jessie? Impossible! The face of

Jessie's companion was closely shorn, save where a slight dark moustache fringed the upper lip. This man had a dark brown beard and full whiskers, and moustaches of the same colour. It was the same man, nevertheless.

Whilst his face and figure were turned away from her, as he looked along the bridge and gave the loud whistle, he had had plenty of time to draw from his pocket and put on the simple but effectual disguise. By the time he again turned, Jessie's power of seeing him or anybody had been completely frustrated. But the men who held and bore her in their arms, and of whom he now assumed the leadership, seemed to notice nothing strange in his appearance. His wide-awake was pulled lower over his brows than it had been when he had been talking to Jessie, and his loose cloak was gathered perhaps more closely about him. The men had enough to do to carry their burthen safely over the steep, rough, slippery path; and as he always kept the lead, and never

turned round when he gave them his brief directions, it was his back that was always turned towards them.

At last a fine ear might have noticed that another sound beside that of the tumbling torrent blended itself with the night. A sound, fuller, deeper, not like that of the stream, made up of quick, turbulent notes, but consisting of long, solemn, measured chords. Gradually the more petulant music was dying away, and the grave, deep-toned music waxing louder and nearer. They were moving away from the Dipp, though still in a descending direction, and getting into the thinner outskirts of the wood. Fairly out of the foliage, they heard but one monopolizing sound, the wash of the waves upon the shore.

"Is the boat all ready?" he asked, addressing another man who here approached and touched his hat.

"Quite ready, my lord; anchored quite safe; sea as smooth as a fish-pond."

"That's all right. I turn off to the right

there, and cut across to the tax-cart. I think it's safe enough."

"Safe as possible, my lord. The horse was fastened tight, and he'd lots to eat. I don't think he'd move, my lord."

"No; I am not afraid of that. But are you quite sure you can steer the boat to the exact spot?"

"Quite sure, my lord. I've had practice enough over the ground; but I can't answer so positively for their rowing."

"Then you must make up for it with your steering. You said one of them had been accustomed to a pair of sculls."

"So he has, my lord."

"He will have to do all that himself. The other fellow will have plenty to do to see after *her*. Mind that he does not hurt her. If she struggles, he is quite strong enough to keep her quiet without injuring her. That's the main point; and, remember, the steering is the next. It's fairly light, and the sea being smooth, you ought not to keep me waiting long."

"You think you'll be there first, my lord?"

"Of course I shall."

"It's a bad, rough bit of road."

"That's nothing. I shall go the short cut. And look you, I hope you have impressed upon those fellows the necessity, for their own sake, of catching the morning train back to town. The moment the boat touches the shore, and she and you are out of it, they must pull back again and lose no time in getting away. Do they thoroughly understand this?"

"Thoroughly, my lord. They're quite satisfied with what I've promised them for the job. They say they've never had such a haul in their lives."

"And the other trap is laid securely, too?"

"Can't miss, my lord."

"I hope not. But even if it does, it will not be too late to lay another. Here is my turn. Remember all I have said; and mind she is not hurt." He glanced

round to see that the two men were behind; and then resigning their guidance to the person with whom he had been walking as he gave the above instructions, he darted away to the right.

The others made straight for the sea, loosed a small boat from its moorings, entered and pushed off. They acted in perfect conformity with the orders given to the man who had last made his appearance. He confined himself to steering. One of the other two rowed away lustily, and on the whole steadily. The third tightly clutched his burthen. Ever and anon there was a semi-suppressed scream, and the beginnings, as it were, of a scuffle. But neither ever came to anything.

“Don’t hurt her,” said the man who was steering. “Don’t hurt her—give her some air. She can’t do much harm here. But don’t hurt her.”

“Shut up, young ’un. I’m carryin’ her like a baby; and she’s about as quiet. She has lots o’ air, and water too.” For every

now and then he put his hand over the side of the boat into the waves, and sprinkled her with the brine. "She'll come to no harm, she wont."

"Quietly. Backwater; just a bit more. Pull away. That's it."

And the boat grated on the pebbles.

"I see him. He's there, and the tax-cart too. Lift her out carefully; there's no use your both coming. You stick to your oars and the boat, or it'll drift away. There's nothing to fasten it to. That's all right. Can you carry her? or shall I help you?"

"*You* help! I could carry you and her too, more like."

Where a lane—a lane evidently made for sand-carts—abruptly ended at the shore, stood a tax-cart and a man. The man stood at the horse's head and did not offer to move from it."

"Put her up there," said the fellow who had late been steersman; "while I get in at the other side and receive her; that's it. And now you'd better go and pull back as

quickly as you can; for if you miss that train, you'll not get another till to-morrow afternoon; and the sooner you're out of this part of the world for the present, the better. I only wish I could go with you. But Saturday night at the old den; and I'll bring lots of plunder with me, for this same job."

"You'd better, or——" He did not finish that sentence, but turning in the direction of the man at the horse's head, touched his hat and said, "Good night, master! And good luck to you."

"Good-night, my man."

And in a minute more the tax-cart was being slowly driven up the lane, and the boat swiftly pulled across the waters.

* * * * *

"She's coming—I hear her, Sam."

"Nay, she's not due yet; not for three minutes."

"She's here all the same. I see the light afore her engine."

"So it is. We've done it to a nicety. Safe again, Bill. Nothing like running no

risks, say I. Seven hours, and we're in Lunnun."

What few people there were on the platform thus early in the morning and before daybreak, were bending forward and looking towards the train, which was coming up from the west. It was slackening speed, and was now close to the station.

"Any passengers for London? Up train to London. Take your seats."

• "This way, Bill. This 'll do us."

"Nay, this looks comfortabler, a deal. Now then, what are *you* arter?"

These last words were addressed by the speaker to a man who had pressed on behind and against him, as though with the intention of entering the same compartment. But instead of getting an answer to his polite inquiry, Master Bully Bill suddenly found his wrists in painful proximity and his person generally reduced to complete powerlessness.

"I say, Sam, look here! Here's a go," he said, turning around to his comrade.

But Sam Slaughteros was in a precisely similar predicament.

"And what may all this here mean, guv'nor?" asked Sam of one of the officials who now had charge of them.

"You know fast enough what it all means. It means that a burglary was committed at Fleetwood Manse last September, and that you and your pal were in it. Now, I caution you both to say as little as may be; for anything you say 'll be used against you when you're tried at the Assizes."

"Do you hear that, Sam?"

"Ay, ay, I hear it."

"Then you'd best say nought."

"All right! I've nothing to say. But it's a rummy start, isn't it?"

"Now then, come along."

"Perhaps the gem'man as we took the tickets of for London, wouldn't mind giving us back the money, as it seems we are not to use 'em."

"You'll want nor money nor tickets either," said one of the detectives, gruffly.

Then there was the ringing of a bell, a whistle, a snort, a heavy creak, and the train started off for London, but without the excellent company of Bully Bill and Sam Slaughteros, who were accommodated in a closed van, and carried leisurely across country to the county gaol.

CHAPTER VII.

“MY COUSIN.”

LONDON was exceedingly full, though the season proper could scarcely be said to have begun. It promised to be a very brilliant one, for there had been a royal marriage, and Easter fell early. As yet, however, it was Lent, and only the middle of March.

But by that date Parliament has usually got into working order, and the clubs begin to be crowded. The hunting months are coming to a close, and the country has as yet brought no compensation for the break-up of winter.

Every young fellow who has the smallest claim to be considered a man of fashion, belongs to the Rutland, and the Rutland

was this evening more than usually full of our golden youth. Some half dozen of these were sitting and lolling near the main window of the reading-room. The Rutland does not profess to be either serious, learned, or political, and there is no necessity in any of its rooms for its members to observe the silence or the decorous whisper which is expected in most other clubs in the apartments devoted to the reading of the daily papers. Hence these six young gentlemen were talking without any restraint.

At last one of the handsomest of them rose to his feet and stood with his legs, Colossus-like, apart, fronting the rest.

“Are you going, Carryngton?”

“Yes, I must. I have to dine—” and he hesitated a little—“at home.”

“Don’t go, Percy, just yet,” said another. “Rendover doesn’t dine before half-past seven, surely?”

“Yes, he dines at seven. It’s a whim of his. Very absurd. But what can a fellow do? Take care of yourselves.”

"But you'll be at the club before eleven, wont you?" asked another, calling after him.

"No, I shan't. I'm going to the Pall-Mall. There's a new piece there, and I've promised to go and applaud. Ta-ta."

"Devilish lucky fellow, Carryngton. They say Rendover gives him anything he wants."

"Then his wants must be very moderate," said a faultless-looking youth, who seemed as though he could absorb all the gold and jewels of Golconda without being any richer, happier, or more splendid for them. "If anybody would give me all I wanted, I shouldn't sit, *in formâ pauperis*, upon this cursed hard table. I'd have Hautbois' ponies, and Rumford's drag, and——"

"Yes, yes, we know all that," said another older lounge. "But Percy Carryngton has a soul above buttons, and would cut us all dead to-morrow to be President of the Board of Trade or some such thing."

"Just fancy that!" exclaimed another.

"*De gustibus*—got a cigar, anybody? Then what the deuce makes him go to the theatre. You don't pass from the stage-box to the ministry, do you?"

"No, but you must ask *Casta Diva* that."

"*Casta Diva*. Who's she? Never heard of her."

"Much better for your young mind that you should not. Lady Godiva, to be sure; Godiva Underhill."

Percy Carryngton meanwhile was hastening on foot towards Grosvenor Gate. He was as handsome and well-dressed as any of the men whom he had quitted, and care seemed to sit as lightly upon his shoulders. The same tailor dressed his tall figure, the same hair-dresser clipped and washed his light-brown hair and trimmed his still lighter beard and whiskers; the same bootmaker encased his feet, the same hatter crowned his person, the same hosier provided his superfine linen, and perfectly-fitting gloves, and from the same stick-seller came that

elegant but unpretentious cane. But there was a something about him, or rather in him, which only just hinted itself on the surface, but which all those dawdlers whom he had quitted, were entirely without.

What was it? Was it in his stride? Was it in the way in which he put down his foot? Was it that slight bend in the shoulders? Was it that carrying of the head, steady without being stiff? Was it the elasticity, the latent possibility of something more, about him, that marked him off from them, all externals in common despite. Many people—most people perhaps—would have failed to grasp or to define it. But he would have been right who had drawn this plain distinction between him and them. None of them would ever have been seen in the front unless they had been born in it. He might, and probably would have come to the front, no matter where he had been born. He had something in him, it was certain—perhaps that something was a great deal. They had pro-

bably nothing in them, and if they had anything in them, assuredly it was very little.

He had reached his destination, and rang at one of the handsomer, though by no means the handsomest, of the private palaces that give to Park Lane its world-wide renown.

“Lord Rendover come in, Davey?”

“Yes, sir. My lord came in ten minutes ago.”

“What time do we dine—seven, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir; the same hour as usual.”

“Then I’ll go upstairs and wash my hands at once.”

Carryngton’s carpets are known the whole world over. But the whole world does not know, though a fair portion of it does, that they took their name from Lord Rendover’s own father, Richard Viscount Rendover, the first peer who bore the title.

Richard Carryngton was perhaps the most successful manufacturer that the Midland Counties, fertile in such men, ever produced. He was able, industrious, frugal,

ambitious. He had a turn, but scarcely a talent for politics, and he saw pretty early on in life that he might possibly walk along his carpets to the House of Lords. He was not too proud at first to accept a baronetcy for his enormous local services to his party, though he had no intention of being contented with the bloody hand as his ultimate reward. He had gradually handed over an entire county to the Whigs, at a time when counties were still more valuable than they are now, and changed the colour of three hostile boroughs; and though not a widely read man, he was too well versed in the history of his country not to know what are the conventional, indeed the constitutional, guerdons for such services as these.

Meanwhile, too, he had increased his wealth to such an extent that he was popularly deemed to be worth his three hundred thousand a year. This, however, as the proceeds of his business. By-and-by it came to be whispered that he was going to retire from manufacturing altogether. But

surely the magnificent business would be continued by somebody? Had he no relations? Would he not sell it? A company might take it up. All these speculations, however, were beside the mark. All his mills were to be closed; no more Carryngton carpets were to be made. The three hundred thousand a year would dwindle, as a matter of course, in the process of being realized and converted, partly into stock, and partly into the far-stretching lands of Carryngton Manor. Still, Sir Richard Carryngton could not be worth less than eighty or a hundred thousand a year.

The next piece of news was that he was about to retire from the representation of the county. What could that mean? It meant that Sir Richard Carryngton was no longer a commoner, but one of the new peers, by the title of Richard, Baron Rendover.

His origin had not been particularly obscure; but certainly it was undistinguished, when contrasted with his present position. Unfortunately, too, he had

married rather early in life, and, therefore, in his then own rank, and not such a noble daughter of a noble line as his later successes would have probably enabled him to take to wife. By her he had two sons, Arthur and Henry, with the former of whom, the present Lord Rendover, we have already made acquaintance. She lived long enough to be Lady Rendover, and to prevent the new peer from still further ennobling himself by a second marriage. He did not long survive her, and was succeeded by his son Arthur, who had never known the taint of trade, was the child of Eton and Oxford, and one of the best looking of the known men of England. He was thirty-five years of age when he acceded to the title, five years before the date of our making his acquaintance at Fleetwood Manse.

The fortunes of the second son, Henry, had been somewhat different. He had been marked out by his father as the means of rendering the name of Carryngton illustrious

in the intellectual, as he himself had already made it illustrious in the monied, and as he was sure his eldest son would make it illustrious in the social world. Richard Carryngton had no idea of anybody connected with him not contributing to his one grand idea of founding a new family. His wife had not contributed much, it must be owned ; but she was not the woman cut out for any such delicate work, and her husband bore with her incapacity in this respect with a toleration that taxed all his kindness. But neither of the boys could be so excused. By the time the younger son was of age, the father had already obtained his baronetcy, and was in a position to push the fortunes of Henry to the very front rank at the bar and in politics, if Henry would only lend his avowedly brilliant abilities to the grand and tempting enterprise.

But no man's career, I suppose, is ever a tale of unchequered success. Richard Carryngton had succeeded in everything

else, but he was doomed to fail in his schemes for the further glorification of his name, through the advancement of Henry. Henry would dance, sing, carouse, and astonish people by marvellous wit and fecundity of unremunerative conversation, but he would do no work. No bar for him, and still less of politics. Travel, if his father liked, he would accept to any extent. Adventure was his passion. Why not let him go and discover a fresh continent, and call it Carryngtonia? Would not that add lustre to the name? The army he would not have listened to, even had it been proposed to him. But he would be a sailor, if that would suit the family, and clear the eastern world of pirates. His father, however, would hearken to his propositions no more than he would hearken to his father's. Then he would stop at home, and live and die “a good fellow.” He did the second very speedily. And so there was an end of the Carryngton ambition in the intellectual sphere. Alas! alas! There was only to

be a rich manufacturer, and then an elegant handsome nobleman. Poor Richard Carryngton! Despite all his successes, he went down to the grave discontented.

I do not know that his heir was very much troubled at the fate of the younger son. But the present Lord Rendover had inherited the ambition of his father, and was, perhaps, just a little mortified that he could not unite in himself the two *rôles* of fashionable peer and illustrious public man. But he had a considerable amount of good sense, and a just estimate of his own capacities. And this last could only lead him to endorse the judgment of his father, who had never for a moment imagined that the elder son was fitted to play the part which had been designed for poor Harry. Had the present Lord Rendover not been a peer of the realm, but only the younger son of one, he might by patient industry and constant attendance have won for himself the reputation of being a very useful member of the House of Commons. Men

of family can nearly always obtain that much approbation and renown from the indulgence of the Lower House. But the House of Lords does not offer similar facilities for such moderate success. As far as Parliament is concerned, a peer is either a distinguished statesman or a person of no consideration whatsoever. Accordingly, the second Lord Rendover contented himself with remaining what we have seen him.

But, like his father, he would have been only too willing that somebody else should do for him, and for the family, what he could not do for it himself; and, at last, he thought that there was somebody who might do it. This somebody was Percy Carryngton.

The great carpet manufacturer had no very close relatives; and the nearest that there were, he did not regard as calculated to do him any special credit. Accordingly, he let them drop out of sight. As we have seen, he did not in the least consult them or their interests when he brought his im-

mense concern to an end. He preferred to have done with it, and to start afresh, as Lord Rendover, with only his two sons as the bearer of his name.

When, therefore, the present Lord Rendover came to the enjoyment of the title and the Carryngton Manor estates, he found that the family, of which he had heard so much, consisted only of himself. But it so happened, that at the very moment of his finding himself its sole representative, he fell across a young Carryngton who was little more than just of age, but whose exterior, at least, fully warranted the inquiries which Lord Rendover at once made as to their consanguinity. They soon made it out between them, though it proved to be no closer than that of cousin, three or four times removed.

The young fellow was an orphan, with little or no substance, and with, as yet, indefinite notions of how to set about making any. His father, but recently dead, had been a soldier, but in the Austrian service;

and the young fellow would have liked to follow the same career. But his father had always opposed the idea during his own life; and it was too late, now that the son was free, to do what had hitherto been impossible upon other grounds. His mother, dead now some years, he said, had been of the ancient family of Scarsdale, but she had brought his father no dowry, and not even the countenance of her relations, only the further removed of whom could have been of any service to her. She had faithfully followed her husband's fortunes, and the boy had consequently shared in them. Hence his education had been almost entirely a continental one.

For all that, he looked every inch an Englishman, and an Englishman of the most distinguished type. Rendover invited him to dinner, and noticed that the young fellow created a favourable impression on the least impressionable of his other guests. He forthwith spoke of him as “my cousin.” It was neither natural nor pleasant to be in

so eminent a position as that of Lord Rendover without having some of kith and kin around to point to. Yet such had been the condition in which his father, the carpet manufacturer, had left him. Perhaps this handsome young fellow was sent to remedy the deficiency.

Still it would never do to accept him very cordially as a relative, unless he were sure to do the family, which now again cropped up, something like credit. Rendover soon discovered that "my cousin" Percy had but an income of a hundred a year, despite the air and manners which would have become the possessor of a hundred thousand. The young fellow's own idea was to be made secretary to some minister or prominent legislator, or to obtain employment in the Foreign Office, where his intimate acquaintance with foreign tongues would be of service to him. Lord Rendover advised him not to push these matters just at present, pointing out to him that his want of intimacy with English

ways and English ideas would perhaps stand as much in his way as his intimacy with continental ones would advance it. And as he backed up his advice by allowing Percy four hundred a year, and putting his name down on the books of two excellent clubs, the advice was cheerfully listened to.

Having done this, Rendover left the young fellow to sink or swim in the big basin of English society. Percy swam amazingly. Without himself going out of the way to introduce him, Rendover soon found that he met his cousin everywhere. Percy manifestly consorted with the best men, and found favour with the best women. At the same time he was doing all this with the most perfect moderation and good sense. Rendover inquired carefully, and discovered that Percy had made no debts and no enemies. Never had four hundred a year and a fine person been turned to better account.

Nor was this all. Five years had passed away, and he was still only a young man

of fashion during the London season, and a guest of shooting lodges, moors, and country houses, out of it. But people began to say more of him than they say of most such agreeable consumers of the fruits of the earth. A clever fellow, that Percy Carrynton, they began to say. A brilliant fellow, that Percy Carrynton. Knows a devil of a lot, that Percy Carrynton. Wonder Rendover does not do something more for him. Why does not Rendover put him into the House? He would do very well there. Just the sort of fellow for Parliament, that Percy Carrynton.

All which opinions, less bluntly expressed, made their way to Rendover's ears, and by no means displeased them. Percy *was* a clever fellow, no doubt about it. He had not had a University education, or indeed a steady education of any kind. He knew no Greek probably, and precious little Latin. What then? He knew the world and himself, had plenty of general information, and was intimately acquainted with what even

politicians in England are usually wholly ignorant of, the tone of continental Europe.

Was Percy Carryngton the “cousin,” who had turned up thus oddly, going to do for the family what poor Harry Carryngton ought to have done? The dream of the father became the idea of the son, and the second Lord Rendover was ready to set about doing in a careless, easy sort of way what the first Lord Rendover had set about with all the earnestness of his nature, alas! only to fail.

But the second Lord Rendover was never in a hurry, until he saw that not being in a hurry would prove fatal to the end determined on. He therefore contented himself with having Percy still more about him, and watching his character and abilities more closely. And it is probable that he would have taken no decided step as yet, had not an additional motive entered into his calculations, and prompted him to spur Percy’s ambition by the offer of an opportunity of agreeably and honourably employing it.

Of that motive we shall know more a little later. For the moment let us content ourselves with being present at this the first occasion of Lord Rendover's opening his mind to his young cousin.

Percy was rather surprised at finding himself the only guest, particularly in London, and at such a season of the year. Nothing was said during dinner to diminish his surprise, the conversation being of that general colour which might have been held between any two men of the world of the respective ages of forty and twenty-seven. But when the dessert had succeeded to dinner, and they were alone with luscious fruits and well-selected wines, the host soon betrayed the reason for there having been no third palate at the entertainment.

"I think, Percy," his lordship began, "that it is almost time you commenced doing something. I do not mean what I am saying at all by way of reproof to you. But do you not yourself feel a little tired

of hanging about without occupation of any sort?"

"Of course I do, and I have felt it some time. But, to tell you the truth, I was waiting for you to speak. You did not seem to think much of my own ideas on the subject, and it was because you wished it that I abandoned them; you know that."

"Oh, you are speaking of four or five years ago. I remember what you mean. I thought then you had better get accustomed to your own country, and to the ways and habits of thought of English people before doing anything. But now I should think you are as thoroughly accustomed to them as any man well could be."

"Well, rather; and I am quite as willing to do something now as you know I was then, if that's all."

"Just so. That's all right. Have you thought of anything?"

"No, I can't say I have; but I very soon can do."

It looked as if Rendover had introduced the conversation in the manner least agreeable to his cousin, with the purpose of rendering what he had yet got to say more acceptable. He saw that Percy was not over pleased at what had been said so far. And the last words, "I very soon can do," betrayed at once both the spirit and the temper of the son of the brave soldier who had taken foreign service rather than find no chance of fighting anywhere else.

"Perhaps you had better listen to my proposal, Percy, before you give yourself that trouble. I should be very glad to see you in Parliament, and will do all in my power to put and keep you there—of course befittingly—on one condition."

Percy Carryngton's eyes brightened amazingly.

"If the condition be not very much harder than the proposition, I shall only too willingly accept it. I could wish for nothing better."

"It is simple enough. That once in

Parliament, you devote yourself to political duties with energy and regularity. I do not care to see you a merely ornamental member, using the House as a more interesting sort of club. My condition is that you try to distinguish yourself. Do you accept it?"

"So thoroughly," he replied, "that I do not think I could have brought myself to close with your offer on any other condition—at least, had the condition been of an opposite nature."

"That is thoroughly understood between us."

"Thoroughly. And you may be sure, Ren-dover, I'm more obliged to you than ever."

Percy, like other folks, had always called his cousin by his title from the first, rather than by his Christian name. It was still the remaining trace of the original strangeness between them, despite of blood.

"I have just a word or two more to say. I shall speak frankly, but nevertheless in strict confidence, you understand?"

"Quite so. You know you can trust me."

"You are already aware that the title goes only in the direct line. Were you greatly to distinguish yourself, one might get that altered by the favour of the Crown. But I do not wish you to entertain any such views."

"I have never done so, you may be quite sure," Carryngton answered with a slight laugh, but with no slight astonishment.

"No; but I thought you might be doing so, in connexion with what I have just said about your distinguishing yourself. You need have no anxiety about ample provision being made for you out of my estate. But the truth is——" and here Lord Rendover looked steadily at Percy, who looked steadily back—"that in all probability I shall marry. Such is more or less my intention. It is almost certain, therefore, that you will never be my heir. I thought it only fair to say thus much to you in perfect frankness."

They were no longer looking at each other. Indeed, Lord Rendover had pushed his chair back, thrown his napkin on the table, and risen. Percy imitated his example.

“There is no particular hurry about getting into the House; only I would not waste time unnecessarily. You know how to go about it just as well as I do. You can make any use of my name in the matter that you like. But I do not care to interfere further. Better for you, in every way, to manage it all for yourself.”

Percy Carryngton, perhaps, did not seem to be quite so rejoiced as he had been a couple of minutes ago. Nevertheless, Rendover could not think that he was not warm enough in renewed thanks.

“I hope you don't want me any more this evening. I promised to go and see a new piece at the Pall Mall. And as the author pressed me very much, and Atwell Underhill has asked me to his box, it will be only civil to go.”

“Go by all means. I have said *all* I wanted to say. I have to vote in the Lords to-night. The division will not be on yet. But never mind. Go when you like.”

Percy Carryngton took his leave at once. It was a night shining with stars, although twilight had only just disappeared. As soon as ever the door in Park Lane closed upon him, he looked up at the sky, took a long pull at his cigar, and said aloud—

“I’m glad he has spoken in time. But I felt pretty sure of it, already. Good-bye then to pretty Gertrude Blessington!” And he broke into an Italian air. “Hi! Hansom. Jermyn Street! On with you!”

CHAPTER VIII.

BEAUTY BLESSINGTON.

THE Pall Mall Theatre is not either the original or the acquired home of the legitimate drama. It is very large in its views of what befits the dignity of the stage, no stickler for tragedy, comedy, or melodrama, but impartially presents to a paying public what its managers imagine will please that public most. It is quite insensible to the protests of classical critics, being classical only in its extravaganzas, having turned into playful and vocal ridicule the story of every known god and goddess, and made mythology as familiar to the dweller on the banks of the Thames as to those on the Cam and the Isis.

But during the last eighteen months or so, the Pall Mall had been affecting, in deference to the presumed existence of popular choice in that direction, the representation of what is called "Domestic Drama." Perhaps policemen and navvies had played rather a larger part in these pieces than one's experience and imagination would be inclined to allot to them in incidents pretending to be especially domestic; and the admirer of home institutions might possibly have had both his conceptions and his preferences a little shaken by scenic situations, in which cunning and crime were the protagonists. Nevertheless, the press and the public seemed to be almost unanimous in asserting that if you wanted to see English modern life faithfully portrayed, you could not spend too many of your evenings in the Pall Mall Theatre.

Thither Percy Carryngton was now wending his way in the same cab which we saw him hail in Park Lane, and

which he had detained at the door of his rooms whilst he changed the uncere-
monious costume in which he had dined
with Lord Rendover, for one more befitting
the time of day. Thus prepared, he
soon reached his destination, asked for
"Mr. Underhill's box," and was at once
conducted to it.

When the door of it was opened, it did
not seem as though there was any room
for him. But place was immediately
made, and not such place only as is usually
accorded to the latest comer. I suppose
the denizens of the box understood their
duty. The last was certainly and instantly
made first. And after the most courteous
recognition of everybody present, he pro-
ceeded to talk to manifestly the chief per-
sonage in it, as though nobody were
present, saving her and himself.

Very soon there was nobody else. There
had been but one lady in the box on his
arrival, and now he was the only man.
But we had better hear what they had been

saying before they were alone, as well as what they said afterwards.

"How late you are!" she said in a tone that had in it just a touch of regret, but not the slightest tinge of reproach, and giving his hand a more cordial grasp and shake than you would have thought could have been given by that tiny palm and those fairy fingers. "The second act is just over. I thought you would have been here for the beginning."

"I couldn't, upon my word. Had to dine with Rendover. Was absolutely obliged. Then I had to stop at Jermyn Street to dress."

"Why did you not come as you were?"

"How could I? You know I never do that."

"*They* do, you see," dropping her voice, and glancing significantly at the other men, who were talking about the play, partly because that subject really interested them, and partly because they knew that Mrs. Underhill's attention was wholly turned

from them for the present. “*They* do, you see.”

“I prefer to pay you a better compliment.”

“And I prefer that you should. Quite right. But I do not take the compliment as wholly directed to myself. I know you are a great stickler for the—proprieties; and part of the compliment is paid to the whole theatre. Part of it, too, is paid to yourself. Percy Carryngton is not—thank God!—as other men. He is a man of fashion, and never sins against the divinities that rule society.”

Her tone was not in the least satirical, but wholly playful. And yet a little reproach might have been construed out of it. If he could so have construed it, he did not choose to do so.

“It’s all very well,” he said, “to throw the responsibility upon me. But how many fathoms should I sink in your favour if I dressed badly or carelessly, forswore gloves, and thought a lounging-coat good enough for your presence after sundown?”

"You would not sink in my favour," she answered, "but I should be sorry—disappointed—at seeing you do so."

"Should I ever have risen into it if I habitually did so?"

"You did not rise into it. You got it at once."

"Thank you! And I do not intend to lose it if I can help myself. Therefore I adhere to the—proprieties."

"Here you are!" exclaimed a cheery voice, as the door suddenly opened, and Atwell Underhill burst in upon them. "Such a lot of people in the house one knows. I have been doing the dutiful here, and the pleasant there, making a bet—a small one, Diva—in that box, and talking over the funds in that other. How long have you been here?"

"He has only just come," answered Mrs. Underhill for him.

"What a pity! Such a good piece. Why did you not come earlier? Couldn't, I suppose. Has Diva told you the story? No!

Well, it's this—as far as the piece has gone."

And Atwell Underhill narrated the action of the play, as far as it had been unfolded on the stage, with no little cleverness.

" 'Gad! How I wish I had written it! Just fancy, Percy, the fun of being called out before a whole theatre, and hearing everybody shouting at you in the pleasantest way imaginable! And then the delight of seeing this bit take, and that situation make a hit. Oh, dear! How different from bills of lading, course of exchange, acknowledging your respected favour of the 3rd, and such grinding away as that. Why don't you turn dramatic author, Percy? "

"Because I have neither taste nor talent for it. To tell the truth, I would rather hear the piece than write it."

"How can you say so?" exclaimed the other impetuously. "Upon my word, I sometimes feel inclined to throw the whole thing over, Underhill, Morris, and Under-

hill, family, money-bags, respectability, City of London, all of it, and buy a wandering booth."

"He's just as bad as ever, Mr. Carryngton, I assure you," said Mrs. Underhill. "He's irreclaimable. He will do it some day, you will see, and I shall have to perform in tights and spangles."

"I will come and support the show if you do. What more can I say?"

"But is it not a good piece?" asked Underhill. "What could be better than that Jew bill-discounter? And that detective! Is he not perfect? I am so glad the piece is going well. He's such a capital fellow, the author."

"You know him, Atwell, do you?"

"Of course he knows him," said the wife. "He knows them all; every author, actor, critic in the town—at least the wild ones."

"The jolly ones, she means. There are authors as stupid as we are; men of business, bankers, statesmen. I don't want to have anything to do with that sort, and I

dare say they do not want me. But where are all the fellows to-night? I thought I should have found some of them here."

"They have been here, and I dare say will come back again."

"They went away," said Atwell, "I suppose, as soon as ever this gilded youth arrived! See here, Percy! Come home with us to-night, and sleep at the Lodge. I must go and see some more people. May I not, Diva?"

"Yes, if you promise to make no bets. Will you come, Mr. Carryngton, as Atwell proposes? Do!" she added, persuasively.

"Of course he will. Idle young beggar, he's as free as air. There's nothing on earth to prevent him. Then it's settled?"

"Wait a little, Atwell! Let me see. I ought—but—very well. No—stay. I really ought to go to-morrow to——"

"Nonsense!" said the persuasive female voice again, "you can go there, wherever it is, some other time."

"Very well. Many thanks. But you

will have to come round to Jermyn Street for my things. I wont keep you five minutes."

"We can do that easily, can't we, Diva?"

"Of course. Now, mind you get into no mischief."

And Mrs. Underhill and Percy Carryngton were again alone.

"You do not seem so very anxious to come home with us," she said, in a voice now of absolute reproach, and with a touch of sorrow in it. "Not so anxious as you used to be."

"How can you say so?" he answered.

"You know I am always only too delighted to come. Quite apart from anything else, how can you suppose I prefer waking in Jermyn Street to the cry of milk and the smell of I know not what, to waking in Jessamine Lodge to the song of suburban birds, and the scent of a dressing-table that *used* to be covered with flowers."

"And is still, and always will be, as long as ever you come—come willingly, that is.

I thought you hesitated a great deal when Atwell asked you, more than I ever saw you hesitate before."

"Not in the least. Now be sensible. I may be what Atwell calls me, an idle young beggar; but still every fellow has something to think of and something to attend to occasionally. And I was scheming how I could manage to neglect a matter I ought to attend to, in order to go home with you. And have I not done it?"

She brightened up again, and talked merrily and pleasantly as was her way when she felt that all was going well. Hers was not a person or a manner that showed favourably under disappointment or reverse. With a flood of social sunshine on her she came out beautifully, both to the eye and to the ear. But the smallest cloud was enough to spoil her.

It is saying a good deal, but Godiva Underhill had come to have the most inordinate love of admiration and worship which ever yet now gratified and now tor-

mented a lovely woman. About her loveliness there were no two opinions. About her loveableness there were many. It may be doubted whether any man had ever really loved her, saving her husband. But she had certainly contrived to impress the world with the belief that several other men had. Let us hasten to say that all of these impressed the knowing part of the world with the belief that, if they had done so they had been very foolish, and had gained nothing by their folly. They none of them had a good word for her, whilst for none of them had she a bad one, and was glad to see any of them again whenever they did her or her husband the honour of a visit. This, however, they did but seldom, gradually disappearing altogether from the ever-changing circle of her acquaintance. Atwell Underhill they each and all declared was a capital good fellow, and it was a thousand pities that he had not a better wife. She was lovely enough to satisfy anybody, but—and then there was an unfair

shrug of the shoulders that might mean anything or nothing. Those shoulders deserved Underhill's big stick across them; but Godiva was very merciful—especially to those who had paid her the admiration which was all she had ever wanted from them; and Atwell Underhill was the most unsuspecting and least jealous of mankind.

One man, and one only, was always ready to take up the cudgels for her, never attempted to drop away from her acquaintance, and never shrugged his shoulders as though there was anything to be said about her which could not better be said plainly by his tongue. He, too, maintained Atwell Underhill to be a capital fellow; but as to its being a pity that he had not a better wife—as some folks said—curse their impudence; what did they mean?

What did this one dissentient masculine opinion amount to? Did it speak well for Godiva Underhill, or only for Percy Carryngton? Or did it speak very badly for

both? Let us not be in a hurry to form an opinion. We shall know in time.

The third act had begun, and a couple of the men who were in the box when Carryngton arrived had returned. The piece still went admirably, and when the drop-scene again fell the applause was general. Carryngton rose from his seat.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Underhill.

"Across, to pay my respects to Mrs. Blessington and her daughter."

"To Miss Blessington and her mother, you mean," she said. "*They* are here, are they?" She had seen the young lady in question long ago, but had probably been imagining that she had been alone in her discovery. "Go along with you, then. I suppose I shall see you at the end of the piece. I am sure I shall not see you before."

"Yes, you will; I shall not stay there very long."

Reassured by this last speech, she said in a quiet undertone—

“Don’t, then. You see with whom you leave me.”

Those with whom he left her perhaps noticed that she was a little more absent than usual. They were not her professed admirers, or she probably would not have spoken of them thus. They were acquaintances of her husband—authors, critics, come to see the piece, and judge it. Still they were gentlemen, and tried to make themselves agreeable to her. But her eyes were striving to see into the box where she had long since descried Gertrude Blessington.

From its position, however, this was not easy. Miss Blessington herself, when she sat forward, was visible enough; but when she turned to talk with any one else in it, even she was recognisable only by her attire. And Percy Carryngton, on reaching and entering it, for the first time became aware that Chichester Fleetwood was sitting at the back of it.

Percy Carryngton came boldly forward, and after due salutations to all three, took

his seat near to the young lady. Mrs. Blessington was occupied with the other visitor, who appeared for the present well contented to devote himself entirely to amusing the mother.

"Who is that pretty woman whom you have just left, Mr. Carryngton?"

"Mrs. Underhill, the wife of Atwell Underhill."

"Oh, really! I have heard that Mr. Underhill had an exceedingly pretty wife, and he certainly has. How do you like the piece?"

"It is exceedingly good of its kind."

"But do you admire the kind?"

"Not particularly. But I think it is fairer to judge a piece from the author's own point of view. I mean that one ought to accept the situation, if one wishes to criticise it."

"Perhaps so. But I dislike the kind so very much."

"What is it you dislike, Miss Blessington?"

"Everything. The plot, the people, the incidents, all of it."

"What is amiss with them?" he asked, with a smile.

"They are so very vulgar."

"But in the sense in which you use the word, so many things that are true are vulgar. The author does not pretend in this piece to present you with a society of fashionable well-behaved people."

"No; but all his pieces—at least, those that I have seen—are equally vulgar. And the gentlemen and ladies in them seem to me more vulgar than the characters that profess to be common people."

"Perhaps that is the fault of the actors," he said, apologetically.

"Do you really think so, Mr. Carryngton?"

"I only suggested it," he answered, "for your consideration."

"Then I do not think so, and I should be very sorry if you thought so," she replied.

"The women—the ladies, I mean—are insufferable."

"Are they never so in real life?" he asked, with a smile.

"No, not in manner. Ladies in real life may sometimes be very disagreeable, spiteful, deceitful, in their conduct—I do not deny it—but in their manner they still remain ladies. But what I complain of in this style of piece is, that the women who are supposed to be nice are so nasty. I dislike the bad ones least."

"Perhaps you are right," he said, quietly.

She was a little disappointed at his answer. She knew him not to be very easy to please, especially in the matter of people's manner and way of expressing themselves. What could be his reason for being thus tender of what she was criticising, and not half so severely as she would have done had he given her the slightest encouragement?

"Do you know Mr. Underhill very intimately?"

"Oh dear, yes, very. He is a great friend of mine."

“And his wife? Do you like her also? Is she very nice?”

He did not answer this question quite as quickly as he had answered the last. And when he did so, he answered in words more measured, weighed, and slowly delivered.

“Yes, she is exceedingly nice. Everybody does not like her. Indeed, I should not be surprised to find that she has enemies. But I like them both,” and here his pace quickened, “very much indeed.”

“But why should she have enemies?”

“Has not everybody?” he asked. “I am sure *I* have.”

“I never heard of any. And I hope *I* have none.”

“Mr. Fleetwood is telling me that he is going into the House,” said Mrs. Blessington, who thought that the two younger people had been talking together uninterruptedly quite long enough.

“Really! And for what place, Fleetwood?” asked Carryngton, who, of course, knew Lord Rendover’s friend well.

"For Leverstoke, when there's a vacancy."

"Is there going to be one soon? I had not heard of it."

"So I hear. It is quite uncertain when, but it may happen any day."

"Why do you not do the same, Mr. Carryngton?" asked the young lady. They were again conversing apart.

"Go into Parliament, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I am going."

"Why did you not tell me?" she said; "oh, I am so glad."

"Because I did not know myself before to-night."

"How do you mean? That you have only just made up your mind?"

"I mean that the chance was never presented to me before."

"And how has it done so, so suddenly?"

"Through my cousin, Lord Rendover."

"Oh, look at that woman! No, it's

nothing. I thought——something in her head-dress. It was a mistake of mine.”

It was a mistake of hers, but not in the sense in which she had meant it. Her sudden turn of the conversation when Lord Rendover was mentioned had not escaped Percy Carryngton; and whilst he kept his eyes upon so much of her face as, during the moment of her averting it, was still open to his inspection, he drew his own conclusions.

Women, however, are not long the victims of sudden confusion. They are never routed by a panic; and Miss Blessington was soon again in full conversational battle-array.

“I am so glad to hear that you are going into Parliament. We all want to see you do something. Everybody thinks that you ought to do something, and I am sure I agree with them.”

“I am exceedingly glad to have your encouragement,” he said, graciously; “but I do hope that you will not expect very much from me.”

“But we shall. What is the use of be-

coming a member, unless you become a distinguished one?"

"Precisely what Lord Rendover says." Again she turned away slightly. But he continued: "That is the one condition that he makes; that I should do my best when I get there, and be a working member."

He rose to take his leave. He was not pressed to stay here as he had been pressed to return elsewhere. Was it because nobody here wanted him very much, or that all women are not so plain-spoken of their wishes as Godiva Underhill?

The piece had still been going forward with unbroken, indeed with increasing success, and by the time the curtain fell it had become perfectly clear that it would have a long and remunerative run.

Atwell was in high glee. Over and above the fact that he wished well to the author, he wished well to the endeavours of everybody connected with the stage. Their triumphs compensated him for his not being permitted to share in

them. So generous and healthy was his nature.

"Now then, my boy, let us go. Come along, Diva; I hope there'll be some supper for us at home. A lot of them wanted me to stay and sup with them; but it will be much jollier all to ourselves, with shooting-jacket, pipe, and nobody to bother."

"Mr. Underhill's carriage!"

"In with you. Home, Jeffrey; no, no; Jermyn Street; I forgot. You wont be long, Percy; will you?"

"Five minutes, and I shall be down again."

"See, there's Beauty Blessington. Who's that taking her to her carriage? Chichester Fleetwood. They say he wants to marry her."

"Do they?" said Mrs. Underhill. "Have you heard so, Mr. Carryngton?"

"Not on any good authority; but it's likely enough."

"Will he succeed, if he wants?" asked Atwell.

"I scarcely think so," answered Percy, as though he had good grounds for saying so. Mrs. Underhill leaned back in the carriage, and the men fell to talking about the piece.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDERHILL, MORRIS, AND UNDERHILL.

JESSAMINE LODGE is a pleasant, modest, detached house in the north-west suburb of London. Its name was given to it before it had done anything to deserve it; but then that is the case with a good many flesh and blood as well as brick and mortar productions. Who can tell if Lionel is going to turn out a fine fellow, or that Grace will be the most ornamental of her sex? And the enterprising builder who christened Jessamine Lodge was just as much in the dark as to whether the sweetly-scented climber would ever deign to decorate its porch.

But Jessamine Lodge had long since jus-

tified its title. It was an inviting-looking little mansion even when Atwell Underhill had first chosen it, nearly two years ago, as the spot to which he should bring his avowedly beautiful bride. And the pains which had since been expended upon its exterior, made it the oftenest pointed out abode of that semi-rural quarter.

To name the firm of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill is to call up, even in the least imaginative mind, visions of all that is grand and successful in commerce, and visions of all that is seductive and enviable in wealth. Underhill, Morris, and Underhill are known in Lapland and at Yeddo, at Genoa and Aberdeen, as intimately at Canton and Callao as in St. Katharine's Dock, or on the far-stretching frontage of masts on the Mersey. Under the Northern Light or the Southern Cross, their vessels are at any given moment ploughing their produce-laden way. No sea, no shore, no wharf, no harbour, no tyro in the learning of the mart, but has made acquaintance

with the ubiquitous trinity of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill.

But though their name is thus in a sense cosmopolitan, it has one special local habitation, a centre of gravity, a home. Shakespeare even, though of all time and all lands, will for ever be associated with Stratford-upon-Avon. And Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, despite the weight they carry in China, Patagonia, or Van Diemen's Land, belong both by birth and choice pre-eminently to the City of London.

They have belonged to it now for five generations. The quantity of turtle that Underhills and Morrisises must have consumed! It gives one the alderman's nightmare to think of it. But they have long since disdained even the highest civic honours. Their predecessors figure largely in the records of the Corporation, but they themselves have got far beyond that. More than once they have been solicited to stand for the City of London, and on one occasion they at last consented to put forward one

of the firm as a candidate for the suffrages of the worthy burghers.

But the result did not encourage them to repeat an experiment which was made against their better judgment. Godfrey Underhill was not returned. All the firm, as a matter of course, are of one colour in politics, and the City of London has not of late years favoured the Conservative opinions which Underhill, Morris, and Underhill have uniformly held. Indeed, an Underhill might as well rob the till or scuttle one of the ships of the firm to which he belonged, as hesitate for a single moment in allegiance to the great Tory party. This allegiance has excluded them from the political honours which the City can confer. But it has confirmed them in their own esteem and in the good opinion of all Englishmen who respect a consistent and self-denying obstinacy of conduct.

But if the City of London has thus refused to the political claims of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill the implicit faith

which it has in their commercial honour and security, some of the more open constituencies of England have arrived at a different conclusion. There are two Underhills in the Commons House, and they both sit for counties. A Morris sits for a rural borough, and a fourth could easily find his way into the legislature, if the firm had not decided that enough had been done by them in that direction for the present. They are men, not only of business, but of sense and discretion; and they do not wish to call further attention to the power conferred on them by their enormous wealth. Such modesty is surprisingly touching.

But if you really want to know Underhill, Morris, and Underhill intimately, you cannot confine your attention either to their commercial or to their political standing, or to both combined. They are a social power, and it is into their homes that you must pursue them.

It has been said that they share in the representation of two shires, and own a

borough constituency in a third. As may therefore be supposed, they own properties in them all. In fact, there is not one of the home counties in which the firm has not a country seat, a park, a manor, a lodge, a grange, a hold upon the land of some sort, and a hold on the affections of its tillers. But it is only in the name given to these seats, and in the precise locality where they happen to be, that they at all differ among themselves. They are all upon one pattern, and all of them chosen and bought with the consent and subject to the judgment of the entire firm. An Underhill or Morris would as soon think of opening a branch house at Odessa or Montreal without consulting his partners, as he would think of taking a country place without previously getting their entire corporate approval for his domestic scheme. It is not often withheld, because it is not often rashly asked for. But it is never by any chance omitted or disregarded.

Perheps, however, it is not so much by

absolute and definite design that the various country places of the firm so much resemble each other, as by that similarity of taste with which likeness of education and of surroundings has indued all the members of this plutocratic family. It is not that the externals of these country seats are precisely alike. They are not. Some are of old Georgian brick. Others are of solid stonework. Others even may be faced with stucco, though with stucco that is as firm as what it is supposed to resemble. Underhill Park is fenced with oak all the way round. Beechgreen Lodge is embowered in blossoming hedges. Trapperley Grange has three lodges, whilst Blepstow Hall has only two. These are mere accidental variations, that happened to exist when they were bought by the different members of the firm. You must get within this mere outer rind, if you are to know the real character of the homes of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill.

First and foremost, they all delight in

extensive and most lavishly-maintained gardens. They overflow with flowers. But flowers are rivalled by sward. The same maker provides the mowing-machines of all the above enumerated mansions, and the most acute judge would be more than puzzled—he would be absolutely unable—to decide which of all their lawns was the greenest, the smoothest, or the most trim. Acres of grass, of course, minister to the wants of the garden; the bedding-out plants enjoying winter cover, literally numbering hundreds of thousands. One large conservatory is essential, and smaller ones are superadded where space permits. A peach-house is equally indispensable, and a Morris or an Underhill who is rich enough and old enough to have a place at all, might just as well write an illegible hand as be without a vinery.

Luxurious and opulent comfort marks the interior of them all. The same renowned upholsterer ministered to each and every one of them. Modern household

furniture, and modern household furniture exclusively, is to be seen in their apartments. Were you acquainted with no other houses but those of Morris and Underhills, you could have no suspicion that there had ever been such a thing as a mediæval bookcase, a cinquecento reading-desk, a Gothic sideboard, or a monastic chair. You would have no reason to suppose that the world was habitable by a civilized man previously to the nineteenth century. But you would certainly come to the conclusion, that the nineteenth century knew very well what it was about, when it dedicated its abilities chiefly to providing for the material wants of mankind.

Similarly, when you transferred your gaze from sofas and hassocks, hangings and ottomans, to pictures and statuettes, you would see nothing to remind you that Phidias ever lived or Perugino ever painted. Greece is nowhere present, and Italy only appears very incidentally. But the Royal Academy is profusely represented; every

English painter of note contributing at least one work to the general collection. By a stretch of liberality, two or three French artists are recalled through the medium of engravings. But Belgium and Germany are as utterly ignored as Umbria or Venice. English, everything English. Modern, everything modern. The objects are such as everybody can talk about, and such as nearly everybody who is ever likely to get admitted into such correct society can thoroughly appreciate. Modern wealth at home is a very proper but not a very many-sided patron. It buys pictures as it buys spring-mattresses; as the newest, and therefore the best of ornamental furniture.

No sketch of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill would be complete without a reference, however brief, to their theological views. England is a religious country, especially on its wealthy side; and Underhill, Morris, and Underhill are too much in harmony with the general feelings of the community not to be a religious firm. But

the good sense and discretion which they have manifested on the Exchange and in the Legislature, they take with them into the nave and the vestry. They abhor theological extremes. They admire Popery and Gothic fancies as little in the church as in the drawing-room; and they have a well-behaved distaste for dissenters. But they would never disturb or offend anybody in the exercise of his religious preferences, and they claim for themselves a like toleration. Of course they think themselves right and all the rest of the world wrong; but as they themselves are a very numerous body, and by far the most influential section of the community in which they move, this self-righteousness never leads them into the smallest conflict with their neighbours.

For five generations, as I said, the firm had existed in the City of London, and during all that period a black sheep or a good-for-nothing had never been known among them. Every Morris and every

Underhill had been steady, industrious, respectable, and successful. Hence it is not surprising that when one of them kicked a little over the traces, the astonishment and alarm of the firm should have been extreme. They had spoiled each other, generation after generation, by the even tenor of their conduct. Faultless behaviour had become so regular among them, that they expected its continuance with as much certainty and confidence as that their bills would be honoured and their drafts accepted. When there came a slight shock to this confidence, their dismay and forebodings of evil were in proportion to their hitherto unruffled equanimity.

The shock was given by Atwell Underhill when just emerging out of his teens. He was a second, not an eldest son; but had been taken at eighteen into employment, though, of course, not as yet into partnership, by the house, whose scion he ought to have esteemed himself mighty lucky to be. But he did not seem to appreciate the

magnificent position which a partial providence had got ready for him. Indeed, he showed himself so restless in the commercial harness into which he was put, that there was a long consultation among Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, as to whether there was a possibility of preventing him, on attaining his majority, from enjoying the uncontrolled possession of a sum of money which would then devolve upon him through the action of a marriage settlement made many years previously. But Atwell's rights were clear, and Underhill, Morris, and Underhill never pretended for a moment to set themselves above the law. They yielded to the situation, foreseeing and declaring among themselves that, as soon as ever Atwell got the money, he would break loose from family control and go utterly to the dogs.

They were more or less right in their prophecies. No sooner did Atwell touch this money than he began to turn it to account. But it was not to such account

as every Underhill and every Morris had hitherto turned whatever inheritance fell into his hands. He sought to obtain from it what amusement a young fellow of one-and-twenty can get out of twelve thousand pounds. The firm was very patient. They thought so highly of themselves and knew that all the world thought so highly of them, that they were determined to do all they could to stave off or hide the dishonour which threatened them. They even went so far as to relax one of their most stringent rules, and offered to admit Atwell into positive partnership at once, in spite of his years, if he would agree to put his twelve thousand pounds into the business and promise not to attempt to take it out for seven years to come. Twelve thousand pounds more or less of capital to them was of no concern whatever. But they thought that they would thus be able to save this young fool from ruining himself and casting a slur upon them, and that at the end of seven years he would

have waxed steady, sensible, and repentant.

But Atwell would not listen to any such proposal. They might turn him adrift if they liked; he had no particular passion for their occupation. But he would enter into no pledge. Least of all, would he put himself in their or anybody else's power. He would have his fun whilst he was young.

They still bore with him, and not only tried to get him to come to the office and work, but winked at his ridiculous irregularities in coming or staying away just as it suited him. At last he solved the difficulty for them by doing what he called "cutting the concern," and leaving them to their anger and mortification. He had already taken rooms in town, away from his own particular home, and had finally to be regarded as the prodigal son and lost sheep of a set of people who had never had a lost sheep or a prodigal son before.

And yet Atwell Underhill was not at all

a bad fellow. Indeed, he was a very good fellow. Certainly he had not a just discrimination as to which side his bread was buttered, and he was wholly incompetent to grasp the nature and extent of the advantages to which he had been born. He was keenly alive to joy and merriment, sunshine and four-in-hand, champagne suppers, fishing expeditions, and general revelry. All these things he might have had in time and with moderation, without cutting himself adrift from that mighty anchor on which was written Underhill, Morris, and Underhill. But he would not have had them quite so quickly, quite so profusely, or precisely in the manner in which he wanted them. He wanted them in the form in which one-and-twenty usually wants them: pure, strong, unadulterated. Underhill, Morris, and Underhill offered them to him diluted, watered, and mixed up with sermons, family prayers, and old maiden aunts. They might just as well not have offered them to him at all.

In a word, he found Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, whether in city or country, in the counting-house or the vinery, at a picnic just as much as at a stock-taking, confoundedly and irremediably slow. He thought just as poorly of them as they thought of him. If some of them came to a race, they came only to spoil it. They always made straight for the grand-stand and stuck there the whole time, and expected him to do the same. They conducted themselves everywhere with conventional gaiety that was worse to Atwell, he declared, than business or the Sunday-school. It was no use ; he could not stand them.

Accordingly he went his way, and a right merry, roystering way it was. He was dear good fellow everywhere, no fool, no bully, no toady. He held his own and wanted no more. He had no pretensions save to being pleasant and to a sort of happy knack of making other people so. He did not squander his twelve thousand pounds,

but he spent it. He was not robbed, for he invariably received an equivalent for his outlay. He mixed with gentlemen, but with Bohemians also; his taste for the latter ever being on the increase. They literally worshipped him. For reasonable as he was even in his generosity, he never inquired whose purse had found the money, when he knew that some were present who had no purse at all.

Of course most of his relatives had as good as given him up, and would not have him even within their doors; though, verily, he had done nothing to unfit him for consorting with the best Christian in the land. Some of them took not a more lenient, but a less absolutely rigid view of the case, and were civil when they met him, and tolerably glad to see him when he did them the honour to call. And one old lady there was who, whilst she showed him outwardly no especial favour, could not be induced to alter her will, made long ago, by which he, in common with various other Underhills,

would come in for a nice thing when the old lady went to heaven. No, she had made her will, she said, and it should stand. She did not approve of Atwell's conduct. Indeed, she strongly reprobated it. But she had made her will, and she was not going to alter it. Perhaps Atwell would grow more steady. Underhill, Morris, and Underhill declared that the old lady was just as bad as Atwell, every bit. The old lady, however, doubted that very much, and shortly afterwards died, very holy and very rich. By her decease Atwell got fifteen thousand pounds more.

To tell the truth, it came in the nick of time. Atwell was now nearly five-and-twenty, and of the twelve thousand pounds which he had first fingered four years ago, mighty little was left. Tailors, wine-merchants, carriage-builders, horse-dealers, jewellers, and needy folks, had swallowed it nearly all up. It is not difficult for a young gentleman, not otherwise employed, but who can devote the whole of his time

to it, to spend three thousand a year in London without absolutely throwing any of it into the gutter. As I said, Atwell Underhill had not been robbed, except now and then by the more impudent section of the poor. A Jew had no chance with Atwell, though a disconsolate widow could fleece him pretty extensively. On the whole, the money had been spent legitimately. But it had been spent.

Here, however, was a lot more, a bigger sum than that with which he had commenced his agreeable career. London tradesmen and London roysterers heard of the fresh windfall, and counted upon having some more pretty pickings. They were, however, doomed to disappointment.

When Underhill, Morris, and Underhill knew for certain that this young scapegrace offshoot had received this new accession of fortune, they again held council concerning him. Could nothing be done? There was greater diversity of opinion upon the matter than had ever been known to exist

among them before. It seemed as if he were to be not only a thorn in their side, but a thorn of division. Once again, however, their moderation and genuine spirit of concord prevailed, and they agreed to overlook all the boy's transgressions, and positively to offer a second time to admit him into partnership, if he would only accept, regarding the fifteen thousand pounds, the terms which he had refused with respect to the twelve thousand. But Atwell was just as independent as ever, and would in no way fetter himself. Then, Underhill, Morris, and Underhill shook their heads, and said nothing more about it, and Atwell sangster Underhill's name was scratched out of a good many last wills and testaments, and he was left entirely to his own devices.

He had seen enough of London and of his native country, and the spirit of adventure had begun to stir within him. He paid all his bills, left not a debt behind him, and went away to the Continent. But

he very soon grew tired of it. He knew no language but his own, and there was not the slightest chance of his ever taking the trouble to acquire another. Amongst Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, and Russians, he found himself a perfect stranger, and he liked their ways just as little as he spoke their tongue. He had not gone to the Continent to gamble; for though Atwell was always ready for a reasonable bet, and generally came off the winner in such mild transactions, he was too shrewd a fellow not to see that gaming tables are chiefly instituted for the purpose of robbing persons like himself with perfect impunity.

What then was he to do on the mainland of Europe? Only amongst his own countrymen there could he find society, and none of it was of the sort congenial to him. There are three classes of English people on the Continent: the stupidly respectable; the learned and scientific; the disreputable. From the first he had been flying, at considerable cost to himself, all his life.

The second would have been more strange to him than Hungarians or Lombards. And to the third he had every honest Englishman's unconquerable aversion.

He would go where the good English tongue was spoken—where there was not much learning, no stupid respectability as yet, very little that was disreputable save among a class lower than any he could possibly be brought amongst, but where there would be novelty, freshness, adventure, a spice of peril, and everything that was seductive. Such was Atwell's view. He would go to both North America and Australia, and knock as much fun out of each as health and good spirits could, when backed by liberty and a sufficient purse.

He was away three years, and turned them to as much account as a man neither lettered nor thoughtful, but only observant, possibly can. And when he returned to England, which he did the very day he attained his twenty-eighth year, he had

nothing more to say about it than that, "It had been exceedingly jolly." No doubt he was much wiser for his travels; but he was not the man to make it appear so.

Travelling, especially when pursued in both hemispheres, is not an economical amusement. Atwell had travelled fast and lived well, and had "stood treat" in savage parts rather more liberally than he was accustomed to do in civilized ones. He had now four thousand pounds left, and he proceeded to get rid of them at once.

Adventure is charming; but I never knew an adventurous soul that did not, after long indulgence in it, revel in the pleasures of London far more hotly on return than before departure. "Jolly dogs" have very short days in the great metropolis, and the bodies of the slain disappear from Bond Street, Piccadilly, and the Row, with a frightful rapidity. You shall walk Pall Mall to-day, and nod to every third man you meet. Go away and return three years hence, and you are a stranger in the land. Other

times, other faces. Rulers of fashion have succeeded who know not Joseph.

But the genuine Bohemian, the man who never had anything to spend, who drinks but who cannot fill, who was born in debt and will die at the close of some rollicking chorus, whose feet are glued to the London pavement, summer and winter, spring and autumn; your author, actor, dramatist, artist, nothing-at-all, him and all his like will you find on your return, still ready with the warm hand and the sad cheery voice of good-fellowship, glad as ever to put you up to the last good thing, and sup with you at joint expense if the supper be moderate, or at your entire expense if the supper is to be grand and costly, and, as he frankly owns, far beyond his still restricted means.

And so with this free-and-easy company exclusively, and not, as before, partly with it and partly with a more golden community, Atwell Underhill now foregathered. Besides, his taste for out-and-out Bohemianism

—I speak not of dishonesty or blackguardism, but of Bohemianism as opposed to kid gloves and dazzling conventionality—had been rather increased by his three years of wandering. Certainly he would have liked to see something more of the manners and customs of the army. In olden days he had many chums at Hounslow and Windsor. But handsome cornets and dashing dragoons are transitory visitors; and over and above the change of regiments in the neighbourhood of London, the regiments which Atwell had lived with on terms of brotherly cordiality in other days, now presented a list of names as strange to him as the genealogy of Noah.

To a man who has any money, living among poor people is more expensive than living among rich ones; and Atwell's last four thousand pounds went, I think, more rapidly than any of the rest. Moreover, he had grown a little less careful about how it went. The business instinct born with him, of seeing that he got his

money's worth, had been worn away to a considerable extent by the life which he had led.

And then it must be remembered that he had now been employed in the game of amusement for seven or eight years, and by degrees he found it growing less and less amusing. He had to spend much more money to pay for much less fun. He grew impatient of not being amused so much as hitherto. He began to throw his money about and make no inquiries. In a very short time all of it had gone.

Had no more than all of it gone? Atwell really did not accurately know. He thought it had all gone some little time ago, but somehow people were assuring him that it had not, and were actually bringing him more. He scarcely knew where it came from, but here it was at any rate; and who wanted some of it? Plenty of people did. And then there was some more for him. And so on, and so on, till Atwell at last found that people, instead of bringing

him money, were positively asking him for it, bothering him for it, threatening him for it, and he had not a doit to divide amongst them. What was to be done?

To arise and go to his father, that terrible father yclept Underhill, Morris, and Underhill. They were a religious firm, as I have said, and had read their Bible assiduously; but they lived in the nineteenth century, and not in the first, and passed most of their time in the City of London, and not by the Lake of Galilee. Accordingly they did not fall upon his neck and kiss him, neither did they kill the fatted calf for his return. They were pleased enough that the prodgal had at length come back, and they showed their pleasure by making him as one of their hired servants. They took him into the office, and gave him clerk's wages at the liberal figure for such services of one hundred and fifty pounds a year. Its increase would depend entirely upon his conduct. Atwell must strive to win back

slowly the confidence which he had scattered to the winds.

But there was this particular difference between the Scripture prodigal and Atwell, that the former had only spent his substance, whilst poor Atwell had done considerably more. We hear nothing of any debts which the parent of the younger son who had lived riotously was called upon to pay to people living in a far-off country. But Underhill, Morris, and Underhill had to make acquaintance with people from a very strange land, a land quite unknown to that respectable firm. Was it true, they asked, that he owed this money, and to such persons as these? Atwell supposed it was. Then let him make a list of all his debts, and bring them to Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, and let there be an end of this bad business.

The poor fellow did as he was bidden, to the best of his ability, stretched out his neck submissively to the collar, and at once went into the shafts. It was hard work—

it was dreary work, but there was nothing else for it. Early and late, late and early, Atwell had to be at the office, not choosing his labour, but dumbly accepting it from other people's orders. He was now close upon thirty, and this is where he was. Out of bed long before daylight, and trudging down to the City on foot or on the top of an omnibus—that was how his day began. He would have liked to take a Hansom, and thought that he could have afforded it, but he durst not take one for his life. Younger, much younger Underhills went down from the country partly on horseback, or in their own traps. But Atwell was the black sheep, the one suspected member of the family, the runaway, the empty-handed, the hired servant. His appearance in a Hansom on his way to business would have been regarded as a symptom of the old disease, as a sign of desire to break away from the present wholesome system of restraint, and be the fine fellow again as of yore. He was the dog with the bad name, and he

sometimes thought he had really better go and hang himself.

But by degrees things mended. He really was so steady, so willing, so regular, that Underhill, Morris, and Underhill began to relax just a little in their severity towards him. The first mark of favour was to raise his salary to three hundred a year, and to intimate to him that he might come to the office in ordinary times at nine o'clock instead of at eight. At last he ventured to take a Hansom now and then, and no remark was made and no displeasure seemed to have been excited. He took one regularly, and still it was all right. His salary was raised to three hundred and fifty, then to four hundred, and finally, at the end of his third year, to five hundred. Remember that every other Underhill of his age was a partner, and was drawing as many thousands. For one who was nominally a clerk, this last sum was a very handsome allowance; still Atwell was only a clerk, and there was no talk of his being made anything more.

Meanwhile, he had made way with the firm in their domestic, no less than in their business haunts. Underhills and Morrises, both male and female, declared that he was such a kind fellow, such a good-tempered fellow, such an obliging fellow. What a pity that he had squandered his money! He might have been a partner long ago, and have had at least thirty thousand pounds in the concern. They really were very sorry for him. Three-and-thirty, and with only a salary! Still none of them could deny that the firm had treated him uncommonly tenderly.

At this precise period it was that he suddenly set his mind upon marrying. We already know that he did so, but whether by so doing he improved or injured his fortunes, there will be a better opportunity for discovering later on.

CHAPTER X.

THE REAL STATE 'OF AFFAIRS.

“No, thanks; I stick to my pipe. Time was when—— But now, nothing like a trusty economical meerschaum. If our people would only make me a partner, I would think of the noble Havannah once more, but till then, I have forsworn cigars.”

“But one of mine. Why not? A new lot; broken into only yesterday.”

“No, no, old boy! No harking back. See, I’m alight.”

Mrs. Underhill had retired to rest, and her husband and Percy Carryngton had made themselves comfortable in Atwell’s snug smoking-room. The windows were

wide open, and the air from without, smelling of the country, yet with a dash of town in it, came in freely, and blended with the tobacco-smoke.

"What could be more jolly than this?" exclaimed Carryngton, leaning out of window. "Such a moon; such a smell of coming buds; such a show of dark laurel leaves! It's better than Jermyn Street, this, and no mistake. I'm so glad I came."

"Why don't you come oftener? You know how glad we both are to see you, both my wife and I. I'm very little here, as you know, except late of a night: my work is so hard, and my hours are so long. But Diva is always here. Too much, I fear," he added, rather sadly. "It's awfully lonely for her. I wish I could afford to keep a carriage for her, but I don't think I can afford it, and there might be a row if I tried it on. She gets out in a brougham from round the corner every now and then. But I wish she had her own."

"Wait a bit, old fellow, and she'll have

one. You are both young, and can afford to wait a little. She looks happy enough."

"Yes, thank God!" said the other, pulling rather noisily at his pipe. "She looks happy enough, and I trust she is happy. And is she not looking well?" he added, with frank pride. "Isn't she looking handsome?"

"She always looks that," answered the other.

"Yes! by Jove! there isn't one among them, with all their wealth, that has got a wife, or a daughter, or a sister, at all approaching her. And they know it, too," he said, knocking away the ash rather violently. "I sometimes almost wish they didn't, and then, perhaps, they'd be kinder to her."

"But are they not kind to her, Atwell? How are they unkind?"

"In lots of ways. They know how to be unkind to each other, do women; and it's the women mostly who are against her, and try to set the men against her, too. Yes, they *are* unkind to her, and that's the simple truth," he said, waxing more ex-

cited. "I wouldn't say it to anybody else, but I can say it to you, Percy, old boy, because I know you so well, and hide nothing from you ; and I know you're a fellow who can sympathize, and yet not go chattering about things up and down the town like a West Indian parrot."

"I shall say nothing to anybody about it, you may be quite sure."

"I know you wont. But I've got it on my mind, and it plagues my life out, and that's all about it."

"I am very sorry to hear you say so. Are you sure you do not exaggerate it, and fancy it to be worse than it is?"

"Not a bit. There isn't one of them that treats her properly. A lot of them never come near her at all now ; and of the rest who do come, some of them come very seldom, and when they do, it looks as if they had come only to show off their infernal airs before her. There's my brother Fred's wife, for instance, and that conceited little monkey who married Frank Morris

last September——But where's the use? They're all very much alike, and there's nothing to choose between them. Every time I find any of them have been here, Diva is as full of complaints as she can be. And you know she's not one to complain without cause."

Carryngton went on smoking his cigar without saying a word. He could not be supposed to be acquainted with the real merits of the case. And even if, in the face of that supposition, he really did know something about it, and had his own opinion thereupon, he could not be expected to give it without very good reason. Had he agreed with Atwell, he would only have increased an annoyance already sufficiently great. Had he happened to disagree with him one does not see how, in common delicacy, he could have given expression to his disagreement.

"But isn't it hard," Underhill went on, "when a fellow has had such a bad time of it as I have had these last four or five years,

and when I settle down, and work like a nigger, and do everything everybody wants me to do, and I bring a beautiful, charming woman into the family, that they can't treat her properly. However, I have made up my mind not to bother about it any more, but to let them all come and go just as they think fit; and the less they come the better I shall be pleased."

Talk of this sort scarcely seemed to bode that Atwell Underhill had in reality arrived at any such resolution. It rather seemed as if he was suffering from a sore which had become so plaguing to him that he must needs show it to somebody. Accordingly, he was thus unbosoming himself to Percy Carryngton. The latter could find nothing better to say than to propose moderation.

"I cannot think, old boy, that the less you see of them, as you say, the better it will be. It is very desirable, not only for peace sake, but also for the sake of your own interest, and, I should imagine, of

your wife's comfort and pleasure, that you should keep in with as many of them as possible."

"But what can a fellow do? I am quite willing to keep in with them, if they will only let me, and so is my wife; but when one of them positively has the impudence to say that her name is not a nice one, and that I ought to call her by something else; and when my own step-mother tells her that she dresses in bad stagey style, I think it's time to stand up for one's self, and not have that sort of thing repeated. And I wont have such interference, and that's all about it."

"But, my dear Atwell, that's the sort of advice and interference which good women in large families are constantly giving each other. You surely don't suppose such a thing never happened before?"

"I'm quite determined it shall not happen again. Just because there has been a lot of Marys, and Margarets, and Lilys, among them for generations, they think there must never be any other sort of

female name in the world. And because they choose to make themselves frights, and dress in what they call the fashion, Diva, forsooth, is not to exercise her own taste, which is something wonderful—now isn't it?—and is not to make the most of herself to please me and everybody—everybody, except them. They would be pleased enough if she only could make herself the figure they declare she does make herself. I tell you what it is, Percy—it's nothing but their confounded female jealousy. They're a very good, but not a very beautiful set, the Underhill women, and they don't like to see a woman about them who cuts them all out; particularly when she's the wife of the fellow among them who's down, and hasn't got any money, nor a grand place anywhere, but only a bit of a crib like this, where, for all that, I wont be dictated to about my domestic affairs; no, not if the whole firm, Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, come in a body to try it on. Gad! that I wont."

And Atwell got up, snatched a vesta from the mantelpiece, struck it fiercely under the same, and proceeded to relight his pipe, which had gone out during the delivery of the foregoing fierce and long philippic.

There was a rather long pause, during which both of them went on smoking, Underhill pulling at his pipe most unmercifully.

"Well, don't do anything rash," said Carryngton at length from the sofa where he was comfortably reclining, and changing his legs as men do when they mean to be very cool and judicial. "In all these matters, forbearance goes a long way. I dare say they think they have a right to say to you what they would not think of saying to any other member of your mighty clan. People are always like that. They *will* attempt to patronize a fellow who has ever come to grief. Never you mind. You are pulling round splendidly. And to tell you the truth, though there is no Underhill, that I have seen, anything like

so handsome as your wife, I don't think women are jealous of each other simply on account of beauty."

"Aren't they, though?" And Atwell laughed a little pityingly at what he deemed his friend's innocence.

"I may be wrong, but I really do not think they are; usually, I mean. And it is to the last degree improbable that a whole family, or rather ever so many families of women, should be. Believe me, Atwell, the fact is that they presume a little on your past troubles, and you are all the more sensitive in consequence of those past troubles than if you had never had them."

"There's something in that, I dare say."

"There's a great deal in it," said Car-ryngton, jumping up from the sofa and throwing away the end of his cigar. Then he said abruptly, "Do you know I am thinking of going into Parliament?"

"The devil you are! I'm delighted to hear it. How is it going to be managed? Has Rendover come out handsomely at last?"

"Sufficiently for the purpose," he answered, walking up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, and with that slight swagger or at least careless oscillation of the figure which nearly all men put on when they announce their successes or their good fortune, but want to announce it modestly. "He has not said anything very definite. He never does. You know when he first acknowledged my claims of blood, he gave me four hundred a year. About eighteen months ago—still without doing anything definite or irrevocable—he said one day in a careless sort of way—mind! this between ourselves, Atwell!——"

"Of course, I understand. I shall not breathe a word to anybody."

"He said that I might spend double the amount if I chose, and that he should not complain if I spent a thousand, but I was not to exceed it."

"And a fine thing too," said poor Underhill, "though I should not have thought so once, and though I should have had five

times the amount if I hadn't been such a—— Well, never mind. And you spend it? You ought to be precious comfortable."

"So I am. But a good slice of it is spent down in Leicestershire, which you don't see, my dear boy. I hunt, you know, pretty steadily all the season; and being a heavy weight, I take a good deal of mounting."

"By Jove! that you must. I can quite understand you live well up to it, that being the case."

"I don't spend more than half of it in London; so that there is not much room for extravagance. However, I always keep out of debt."

"Lucky fellow!" exclaimed his companion, stretching out his big arms, and taking a long breath that was uncommonly like a sigh.

"Well, as I was saying," Carryngton went on, "when Rendover spoke to me to-day——"

"To-day was it?"

“Yes, only to-day—I dined with him alone—he simply said that he would see to putting me in the House and keeping me there; by which, of course, he meant he would find the money. And then he said something about making an ample provision for me, but again nothing definite, no fixed sum I mean, was named.”

“Oh, but you’re all right, if that’s the case. He’s sure to do the right thing, as he seems to have done all along. By Jove!” and again Atwell Underhill drew a deep, long, audible breath from his broad chest, “you’re a lucky fellow, and no mistake! Some fellows seem born to luck, somehow.”

“You have had a fair share in your time, old boy!” said Carryngton, partly moved to saying it by a sense of justice towards unfairly aspersed fortune, and partly from a desire to reconcile his friend to existing circumstances. “And if you are only patient, and commit no more blunders—and I am quite sure you wont—depend upon it that you will be lucky again. You have only

to hold your ground quietly, and your fortune is already made. Rendover has behaved very well to me; but I don't think I need be envied by any man who has at his back Underhill, Morris, and Underhill."

Atwell Underhill did not seem to be quite so much comforted by these words as Percy Carryngton thought he might have been. The younger man was still walking about, looking very well contented with himself and things in general; but the elder one still remained seated. It is so easy to take a sanguine view of our neighbours' affairs when our own are decidedly looking up. But the improvement in our prospects by no means suggests similar visions to them. Atwell answered despondingly—

"I'm immensely glad, you may be sure, to hear of your good fortune. But, to tell the truth, I'm rather down about my own just at present. Indeed, I'm very down, and that's the plain truth."

"But why, my dear fellow? What's wrong?"

“Well, I’ll tell you what’s wrong. You’re the only fellow in the world I’d tell it to, and I tell it you in the strictest confidence. The fact is that when I first came to grief, and had at last to go to my people, and eat humble pie and that sort of thing, I had a lot of debts.”

“So you told me before. But then they were all paid for you.”

“Wait a bit, Percy, old boy! They weren’t all paid.”

“But you don’t mean to say——”

“I mean to say that at that moment, when my people told me to make a list of all the debts I had, I really didn’t know at all what money I owed. As long as I had plenty of money, I kept my head quite steady, and paid my bills regularly, and could have shown as good books as our folks in the City themselves. But when money began to be scarce, and I didn’t know where to turn for it, I got careless. Then I suppose I got reckless. I know it’s a great shame, and I’m awfully sorry for it;

but where's the use now? I took money from anybody who gave it me, and I lived on tick all about the town, just as you know almost any fellow can for a time, more especially a fellow like me who had once had lots of money and had paid his way regularly. They would have trusted me to almost any amount, and as for getting things from tradespeople, I could have gone on for three or four years easily."

"I quite understand that," said Carryngton, who was perfectly aware that, by his connexion with Lord Rendover and his own position combined, it was in his power to go and do precisely the same. "I know these West-end tradesmen well enough for that. But, as I say, your people told you to tell them of all that you owed, and they would pay it all, and then there was an end of the matter."

"I wish there were," replied Atwell, mournfully. "But what could I do? I did my very best. I tell you I did not know precisely, or anything like precisely,

the extent of my debts. I had been living, towards the end of my tether, too hand over head for that. But I went about, and gave myself no end of bother, and saw everybody that I thought I owed money to, and so made out my list. Heaps of fellows—the scoundrels—that I felt sure I owed something to, swore that I owed them nothing. And then there were acceptances that had gone heaven knows where! I thought, or hoped at least, that I had got hold of them all, but I hadn't."

"But most of them, surely?"

"Yes, most; but a good many had escaped me, and afterwards they turned up, and other debts as well, and what was I to do with them?"

"To take them to your people, to be sure, and explain how they were part and parcel of the old ones, and how you had overlooked them."

"I couldn't do that, Percy, you see. When I took my list, they asked me if it contained everything, and I said that I be-

lieved it did. They warned me that it would be no use my ever bringing another; but that everything in it should be discharged, and I should never hear another word on the subject. I had been so bothered, and had had such a lot of trouble, and was so glad to have the whole thing settled, that I hoped for the best and said no more."

"Then you were a great fool!" Carryngton felt prompted to reply. But he checked himself, and kept the disagreeable truth to himself.

"But when the debts and the bills which you had overlooked came in upon you, what did you do?"

"What could I do?" asked the other, desperately.

"Take them to your people," he answered.

"My dear Percy, you don't know my people. That was quite out of the question, and I knew it was. They had taken me into the establishment in the City, and I

was getting on all right. But if I had only breathed a syllable about these infernal things, they would not only not have got me out of the scrape, but they would have sent me packing altogether, and where should I have been now?"

"What *did* you do, then?" asked Carryngton, doggedly and a little impatiently.

"What did I do? Why, I paid some of the tradesmen, and have got others to wait a bit. And as for the bills, I have got them renewed, and done the best I can. And if I can only get time, I have no doubt it will be all right in the end. But these fellows are so bothering. They're always at one. They're just as keen now as they used to seem careless—the scoundrels!"

Carryngton saw at a glance how matters really stood, and how they had been brought about. When poor Atwell was doing his very best to get a complete statement from his creditors of the extent of his liabilities, some of his creditors had been doing their very best to keep back from him the infor-

mation he wanted. They thought that it would never do to let their pigeon escape from them so easily. They believed that he had plenty of feathers left, and they were bent upon having the picking of them.

"And what may all these liabilities amount to?" asked Carryngton, quietly. "I suppose you know their extent exactly, now?"

"Yes; I knew that long ago."

"And you say you have paid some of them off?"

"Some of the simple debts, yes. In fact, all or nearly all of them. But the bills—the acceptances—are still in existence and have had to be renewed five or six times, or I have had to give fresh ones for them; so that, in reality, I am much worse off than I was when I first heard of them."

"Are we to go on talking about this, or do you wish me to drop the subject, Atwell?"

"Go on, by all means, if you like. I don't want to hide anything from you, and

I'm sadly in want of comfort on the subject."

"How much do these bills amount to now, do you suppose?"

"Close upon three thousand pounds."

"The deuce they do!" exclaimed Car-ryngton. "And how much were they in reality at first? That is, what would have been their amount, if you had got hold of them at the time and taken them to your people and got them settled?"

This was pitiless questioning. But Atwell had told his friend to go on, and his friend was too direct and downright a man to spare his witness when truth was the quest.

Nevertheless, poor Underhill did not seem to like the rigid inquiry. He moved uncomfortably in his chair, got paler, seemed to be mumbling figures in his mouth, and trying to make them come forth with as shrunken dimensions as was possible.

"Now, out with it, old boy! It's no use

deceiving yourself, or trying to make matters pleasant. No good can come of that."

"Well, perhaps eight or nine hundred pounds. Certainly not more than a thousand."

"And now with the renewals and the interest, these same bills of yours figure at three thousand. Are you sure it is not more?"

"Well, it may be a hundred or two more."

"Are you quite sure that three thousand five hundred would cover them?" asked Carryngton, determined to get at the truth and know the worst.

"Yes, quite sure. There's a fellow that's willing to take them all up—for there are several—if I will give him one new bill for that amount, at six months."

"At what interest?"

"The three thousand five hundred will cover everything; for as I told you, the old bills don't amount to more than three thousand two hundred."

"Ten per cent.!" muttered Carryngton;

"moderate man, under the circumstances! But don't you see," he went on, turning directly to Underhill, "that this is only the commencement of his dealings with you. I suppose the others were equally moderate at first, eh?"

"Of course they were. I know he'll stick it on hard enough when the six months are out, if I want the bill renewed."

"Which you are sure to do," answered Carryngton, remorselessly. "You can have no earthly chance of meeting it."

"Unless something turns up."

"But things never do turn up. You ought to have found that out by this time, I think."

"Yes, they do sometimes, Percy," said Underhill, apologetically. "I may be made partner."

"Partner, without any capital! And then if there came a bad year, and there was loss instead of gain, you would be worse off than you are now with your salary. It would not matter much to any

of the rest of the firm; but to you it would be the deuce."

"But you always suppose the worst. It might be a good year."

"And, as I say, it might not. A man ought always to suppose the worst in such circumstances. You gratuitously assume that you will be made partner, and will sack a large sum the very first year. You have no right to assume either the one thing or the other."

"I suppose I have not," he answered, when the matter was put to him thus plainly and impartially.

"But see here too, Atwell! You would have to meet this new bill in six months from the present time. And even supposing that all your sanguine assumptions were by a wonderful piece of good luck, to turn out to be true, still in six months you would not have got hold of your profits. No, not even if you were to be made a partner to-morrow morning."

"True enough; I can't deny it," said

Atwell, despondingly. "But at least I should be nearer to being in a position to get rid of these usurious brutes."

"That does not necessarily follow. Do you suppose if these brutes, as you call them, were to hear of your being made a partner, that they would not—to use your own forcible phrase—stick it on still more heavily; knowing that you would be better able in the long run to pay a larger sum, and more frightened than ever of anything about it leaking out and getting to the ears of your partners?"

"Yes, that's true enough. Of course they would."

"Well, look here, old boy! You seem to care for my opinion on the subject; and as it is a perfectly impartial one, and I have your interests warmly at heart, it ought to be of some little value. Will you promise me that you'll do nothing in the matter without coming to tell me first?"

"Yes. But something will have to be done very shortly."

"In how long, at the outside?"

"A fortnight or three weeks. Three weeks, certainly."

"Very well. I won't forget. I want to think it over and see what had best be done. If *I* can do anything, I will."

"Thanks, old boy, so much for your advice. You're desperately severe in getting at the truth; but I always feel better somehow, when I've talked things over with you."

"But this must not end in talk. Something must be done, and I will help if I can."

"No, but my dear Percy——"

"Nonsense! Do you think I've forgotten how kind you were to me in the Tyrol? If I could only show you how I remember it, it would delight me immensely. Now, let us go to bed."

"By Jove! it's after one, and I shall have to be down at that disgusting City at nine! I shan't see you to-morrow morning before I go. It's no use waking you. But

stay for dinner to-morrow, so that I shall see you when I get home. Seven and a half, you know. I can't get away before then."

"I'm engaged to-morrow to dine at the Club. But I'll be up again at the Lodge before long."

"Do, like a good fellow. And stop as long as you can to-morrow and cheer up Diva. I know it's dull for her."

"All right. And mind you do nothing about that other thing till I see you again."

"Agreed. Good night, old boy."

"Good night, Atwell."

And they separated.

CHAPTER XI.

PERCY CARRYNGTON THINKS THINGS OVER.

PERCY CARRYNGTON had not to be down at the City at nine o'clock, and therefore had no motive for being in a hurry to get to bed. He was a gentleman at large, a man of fashion, who did not want time to stop for him, and who would have led just the same life that he was leading if time had taken it into its head to go twice as fast. He could lie abed till any hour of the morning, or indeed the afternoon; and its being now between one and two was to him a matter of complete indifference.

He looked round the room. What a pretty room; and how tastefully furnished! There were no signs of luxury, but all the

signs of comfort. But there was more than that. There were signs of thoughtfulness, and more than all, of a woman's thoughtfulness. No man ever arranged that table near to the large, long, soft sofa. Men use ink, paper, pens, blotting-pads; but they never prepare them in that fashion.

But a maid-servant might have done it? I think not. There are hands and hands; and there I think I see those of a mistress. There is handcraft and heartcraft; and the latter is very different from the former, and its works are discernible by all save the very obtuse. No. On the whole, Phyllis, however neat, did not prepare that writing-table.

And how about the toilet-table? The visitor's dressing-bag has been opened, and his silver-mounted bottles and ivory-backed brushes—of course with monogram—have been laid upon it; and this much might possibly have been done by hired fingers. That is within the range of possibility.

But there are knick-knacks on the stand

of the looking-glass as well as on the table; knick-knacks that are very pretty to look at, but withal have their possible uses. They are feminine, however, in their character, and have been selected by the feminine mind. I cannot help thinking that a lady's dressing-table has been partly despoiled in the bringing of them here.

But if conviction be still withheld, how about these flowers? And those also on the writing-table? For note, there are flowers upon each. And how choice, and how beautifully arranged! There is not only feminine deftness here, but there is much of the heartcraft of which we spoke. Listen to some one who ought to know.

"Charming, how charming! Sweeter than ever. Everything perfect. And these flowers. And those. O Lady Godiva! Very wrong of you; for I am sure some of these are bought. Jessamine Lodge has none of these ready as yet. But it's very jolly, all the same."

And the pleased soliloquist exchanged a

smoking-coat for a dressing-gown, and walked to the open window, in front of which a moon sixteen days old was shining.

A man does not reach the age of eight-and-twenty without losing much of that sentimental tenderness for the moon with which, if at all of a sensitive nature, he perforce regarded her as a boy. She is still a very beautiful object, about which many exquisite things have been said. She still makes night more lovely; and ever and anon, just for a moment, her rays seem to touch some long silent chord down in the vague depths of the heart. But the touch and the influence are but transitory, and again it is the moon in its first, second, or third quarter, as the case may be.

It was unusually lovely to-night, and Percy Carryngton felt that it was so. But he did not feel it as he had felt it many and many a time in the Alps or on the Mediterranean a dozen years ago, when he was still in his golden teens. He lit a cigar. This

he would once have considered as a heartless profanation. Now he regarded it as a very great comfort.

“Very, very beautiful! How the light shimmers on the laurel leaves! Better than Jermyn Street, unquestionably.”

And he proceeded to mark the intensity of his admiration for the scene by turning away, wheeling aside the little writing-table, and flinging himself on his back on the large soft sofa. There, with his hands behind the head and his knees slightly raised, he could smoke and think at ease. Moonlight does not assist sober reflection.

Must he then give up all idea of marrying Beauty Blessington? It looked uncommonly as though such was to be his fate. She was immensely nice, very lovely, unusually gifted, admirably well educated, and—he could not help thinking—rather partial to him. It seemed a pity.

The tears were not rolling down his face, and he did not look particularly woeful. The smoke of the cigar curled itself slowly

about his head, wreathed itself into widening circles, and floated leisurely away. His thoughts seemed, like it, to be calm, measured, and steady.

He should have liked not to have been pulled up quite so suddenly. He wished he had not been driven to a decision so soon. He had seen so little of her; far too little to enable him to know if she were worth his staking all the rest of what was valuable in life upon winning her.

Yet, after all, was he not fortunate in being warned thus early? Only his admiration and liking, so far, were involved, and he could go on admiring and liking her as long as ever he chose. His deeper feelings had not been pledged in the least. Instead of regretting the sudden check which he had met with, he ought to be exceedingly glad that it had come before he could possibly pretend that the check seriously hurt or chafed him.

For supposing that it had come a little later, when his feeling of admiration for her

qualities had ripened, as it probably would have shortly ripened, into a feeling of more than admiration for herself, what chance would he have had of pulling successfully against it?

For the world was the world, and Lord Rendover was a peer of the realm, good-looking, in the prime of life, honoured, and with eighty thousand a year; and he was Percy Carryngton, good-looking enough, too, for that matter, and younger still, but just nobody at all, save Rendover's cousin, and—dependent. Gertrude Blessington was one of the belles of the time, very noble, brilliant, and all that sort of thing, and partial to him perhaps, over a good many other people. But she was a young lady of the nineteenth century, with relatives, friends, influences about her; not an inhabitant of dreamland, but of Hill Street, Berkeley Square.

Given these data, did it require much smoking or much thinking to arrive at the conclusion that, supposing Lord Rendover

wanted to marry Gertrude Blessington, it would be sheer idiocy for Percy Carryngton to set himself up as his lordship's rival?

That Rendover wanted to marry her, Carryngton now felt perfectly certain. After what had passed between them at dessert to-day, there could be no doubt about it. It was not only what Rendover had said, but still more the way in which he had said it, which had carried this conviction irresistibly. Their eyes had met, and at that moment their minds had met also.

Otherwise, why should Rendover have chosen that particular moment to point out to his cousin that it was time for his inaction to cease, that he had better take to a political career and devote the whole—yes, the *whole*—of his energies to that one end? Why should Rendover have selected that occasion to refer, though in the most delicate manner, to the relation between them, and to add that not only should Percy be efficiently supported in his attempt to enter

the House, and in his necessary expenses when there, but that ample provision should be made for him hereafter? The motive was too clear to be questioned.

Rendover had conveyed what he wanted to convey in the most skilful and totally inoffensive way. But rendered bluntly, his meaning would have stood thus: "Look here, Percy! I am going to marry Beauty Blessington if I can. I don't suppose you are fool enough to think seriously of trying to do so yourself. But now that you know that I am going to do so, do not get in my way unnecessarily, but abandon even any slight and vague notions you may possibly have on the subject. Your fortunes lie in another direction. Here's plenty of money for you and a grand opening—go on and prosper. Refuse, and the alternative is too plain to require stating."

Had this intimation been addressed, though ever so delicately, to a young fellow who was in love with Gertrude Blessington, he would have been the most con-

temptible of his kind if he had not at once unmasked and resented the insult. But it was addressed, in the way with which we are acquainted, to one who was as yet no more in love with her than you or I.

“You young ass!” exclaimed Carryngton, jumping up from the sofa, “to think that you, without a farthing or anything else that you can call your own, could by any possibility marry the beauty of a season! The thing’s absurd. But then I never supposed it. She’s wonderfully nice, and I hope Rendover will get her—and of course he will (I don’t think Fleetwood has any chance against him, even if he be thinking of it); and then I shall have the most charming cousin in London.”

He walked up and down the room, finishing his cigar. He was not smoking so slowly now, and one might have been sure from the greater rapidity with which the tobacco clouds emerged from his mouth, that he was thinking less quietly than he had been hitherto.

He was thinking of the prospect which was now stretched out before him. It was certainly a magnificent one, and to a young fellow with a spark of manly ambition in him, a most inspiring one. The English House of Commons is the finest arena for the intellectual combatant the world has ever seen. Perhaps only in it and in the playground of a public school, is complete and unerring justice done to everybody. A man may paint admirable pictures, and the age may have eyes and see not. A man may write excellent books, and they may be too good and too precocious for the time. A man may be a profound philosopher, and the probability is that the world will pay him little heed. But in the House of Commons no true note is ever stricken that does not ring—no blow sent home that does not tell—no blunder made that is not swiftly punished. It is perhaps the only place where a charlatan has no chance of succeeding and a wise man no chance of failing.

I do not think Percy Carryngton was conceited, as young fellows go. He was aware that residence abroad had given him some advantages, but he was also alive to the fact that it had entailed on him certain drawbacks. Judged by a high English standard, he was not satisfactorily educated. Most of what he knew, he knew by consorting with men of the world, by keeping his eyes and ears open, and by reading where and when he was interested. There had been too little plan and method in his education, too little steadiness of end in his studies. He had never undergone examination in anything in his life, and consequently it was difficult for him to be certain what he knew and what he did not know. He had never measured himself against anybody or against any test.

Of all this he was thoroughly aware, but he comforted himself with the feeling that he had a good, if not a superior intelligence, and that he was not only willing but intensely anxious to learn from any teacher

and from any quarter. He was sure there was stuff in him, and he was determined to make the most of it. Modesty and hard work at first, would end by inspiring him with confidence in himself, and a confidence that, he trusted, would come to be shared in by other people.

He was building up no magnificent castles in the air. He was dreaming of no secretaryship, no office, scarcely indeed of any remarkable success. But he thought he should be able to do something or other, though what it was he did not like to imagine even to himself. Anyhow, he would do his best. He would have splendid opportunities. Anything was better than his present do-nothing life. He wished he had already taken his seat.

He threw away the end of his cigar. His eyes looked brighter than before. Evidently, ambition was doing, as usual, its skilful work. He scented the pleasant and courteous tumult from afar, and he was already beginning to long to be in it.

He went to the window in order to close it before undressing and getting into bed. He did not shut it at once. The moon was shining more beautifully than ever. He leaned out of window, and gazed into the open air. Then his eye fell on the shimmering laurel leaves. How bright! how peaceful! how full of tender, quiet beauty! Would not the folds of a female dress look well on the gravel path down there among the laurels? And supposing they were Gertrude Blessington's, and that he was walking there with her, in the moonlight? Would it not be pleasant—better than anything ambition could offer?

He closed the window without answering the question, and was very soon lost to all such doubts in the depths of sound and tranquil slumber.

CHAPTER XII.

“LADY GODIVA.”

FREE as was Percy Carryngton to protract his slumbers far into the day, nevertheless he was out of his room and downstairs at a quarter before ten. Good health and constitutional energy saved him from the worse risks of an idle life.

Atwell had long since gone to the City. He was better off than in the bad, trying by-gone days, when he had to be there by eight, and get there on foot, or by the help of a dilatory omnibus. Still it is not an easy thing for a man to sit up smoking with his friends till an hour and a half after midnight, and yet at nine o'clock the next morning be four miles away, even though

he have the aid of the very best and most willing Hansom cab on the stand.

Atwell invariably breakfasted alone, if breakfast that can be called which consisted of swallowing, in a standing position, half or two-thirds of a cup of hot tea, as the case might be, cramming a piece of toast down his throat, and munching it as he hurried through his slip of garden to where the same “cabby” regularly awaited him.

Mrs. Underhill was never down to pour out his tea for him or see him off. It was so terribly early, she said, and poor kind Atwell not only agreed with her, but begged her not to think of getting out of bed so soon. He was quite sure it was not good for her.

“And I am quite sure it is not,” she would now and then say apologetically to Carryngton, about whose opinion she was always rather anxious, and who she knew would have thought better of her if she had been downstairs every morning to minister

to her husband. "Every time I have tried it, it has made me quite ill and unfit for anything for the rest of the day. Besides, it makes the day so long if I get up at seven o'clock. And even if I get up only to come downstairs just to give him his breakfast, and then go back again to dress, I should then have finished dressing by half-past nine; and what is there to do from half-past nine till luncheon-time? And then what good would it do him? He is not a couple of minutes over his breakfast, and is always in such a hurry to start that I should only be in his way. I see you don't think so, Mr. Carryngton, but I can't help it."

This morning, however, it was nearly ten o'clock, and she was not yet down. In came the waiting-maid.

"Please, sir, mistress wants to know if you will begin breakfast or wait for her. Here are the keys."

"All right, Mary, but I will wait."

"Mistress says she will not be more than twenty minutes, sir."

“ Very well. I am in no hurry.”

He sat down and waited. It was an exceedingly pretty room, looking out into the same garden at the back of the house as the smoking room above it looked into. It was a beautiful bright March morning. In the London streets, no doubt, wind and dust were raging; but here the breeze only swayed the branches, and shook more odour out of the swelling buds. One of the windows was open, and he did not close it. The morning air was so sweet.

• He took up, one by one, what books there were. But the only ones new to him were three French novels and two inferior English ones, all from the circulating library, such as he already knew formed the staple reading of his beautiful hostess. The other books, and they were very few, he had seen there over and over again. They consisted mostly of the more serious and ethical of the English poets, and were all of them wedding presents from the junior and female, and therefore less wealthy, members

of the great, rich Underhill family. The remainder were purchases of Atwell's own, and treated of dogs, horses, hunting, and yachting. These last were good and healthy books, but Carryngton already knew by experience as much as they had to teach.

He took up one of the more grave of the poets, read a few lines, laughed, and laid it down. Ten minutes had gone. She would be down directly. He sauntered up and down the room, but there was in it no new object for him. It had been furnished by Atwell's father, under the judgment of Atwell's step-mother, enlightened, of course, by the general floating opinion of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill. Accordingly, it was furnished faultlessly.

But Atwell's own small purse, at the service of his wife's genius, had contributed a few of the ornaments; and these were, perhaps, not altogether in keeping with the rest of the furniture. There were one or two chromo-lithographs, after a famous Parisian hand, and a few statuettes after

Pradier, whose presence was evidently not dictated by the same mind which had suggested the chaste curtains, and the subdued colour of the carpet.

“Am I very late?” asked a voice entering the room, as he stood at the open window, looking at the blown-about sycamore shoots.

“Not at all.” And he turned. “How are you this morning?”

The question was courteous, but otherwise unnecessary. No one could have looked at her for a moment without seeing in her the very picture of health. She was seven-and-twenty, and she looked it, but a seven-and-twenty that still kept youth in its service. She was slight, and at a first glance appeared to be of considerably more than middle height. In reality, however, she was not much above it. Her figure was excellent, and her head well put and well carried on her shoulders.

Would she have been lovelier still had she been fairer? Some said yes, some no.

It was a moot point, and one often debated among her admirers. Chestnut was her prevailing colour. It was in her hair, her eyes, her complexion. All the lines in her face were clearly cut ones. There was nothing indefinite anywhere in form, everything more or less indefinite in colour. Her eyebrows were perfect. Her nose was scarcely aquiline, but it was always called such. Her mouth and chin looked more as if they had been modelled than as though they had grown. Her teeth were a little close, but they were small and white. Her expression? I had forgotten all about it. So did everybody forget it. Perhaps she had none. Really, I scarcely know. I only know she was very lovely.

She was singularly attired, for dressed would not be the word. Her hair, strictly speaking, was not done at all. It was allowed a sort of morning latitude which enabled it to display its profuseness. Her dress—if dress it must be called—was white, tricked with blue. She wore no

ornaments of any kind. She looked very beautiful, but it must be owned she did not look like an English wife.

“How are you this morning?” had been his question.

“Never better,” was her answer. “How could I be anything but well, when I knew I should find you here when I came down! Oh, you cannot tell how dull it is of a morning here till luncheon time! Nothing on earth to do. One cannot go out, and there is no chance of anybody coming. It is such a relief to have you here. I do wish you would come and sleep here oftener.”

“I think I come pretty often, and I am sure it is, to say the least of it, just as delightful to me as it can be to you.”

“That’s all right. Come and have some breakfast. You must be hungry, waiting all this time. I did not think you would be down so early. Had I known it, I would have got up sooner. As it is, I hurried as much as I could. And, you see,

I am not half dressed, in consequence. How did *you* sleep?"

"Perfectly. Atwell and I sat up chatting till after one."

"You don't say so? I did not hear him come to bed, and I did not hear him go away this morning. I do sleep so soundly, especially when I go to the theatre."

"I slept just as well when I *did* go to bed. But I could not have gone till nearly two hours after you did. It must have been nearly half-past one when Atwell and I said good night, and I smoked another cigar, and flirted with the moon after I got to my own room."

"Flirted with the moon, did you? Then I suppose the flowers got no attention," she said, archly.

"Did they not, though? They were exquisite, both those on the dressing-table, and those on the writing-table. But I suspect you have been very extravagant. What a pity to get them *for me!*"

"Pity, when I know you like them so

much? I was hoping that some of Atwell's people would be coming yesterday, and bringing some with them; for, as you may suppose, they have any amount; all of them—except poor Atwell himself.”

“But you did not know I was going to sleep here.”

“Did I not? I flatter myself that I did. I knew that Atwell was going to ask you, and I was rash enough to be certain that you would accept the invitation. Perhaps I was *too* rash?”

“It would appear not,” he answered, “seeing where I am at present.”

The breakfast room, like the room which they had just quitted, was exceedingly well furnished, and there was handsome silver on the table. But it was in anything but good order; and though there was a profusion of everything to eat that man could desire for the first meal of the day, it was set out in a manner that betokened the slatternly hand of the servant of a mistress far above all such domestic details. There

were flowers, and busts, and vases. But a prying housekeeper would have remarked that there must be very little dusting, although a stray brush might have been seen protruding from under the sideboard.

"But what might be the reason of your smoking another cigar after getting to your own room? Why did you not go straight to bed? It was late enough. And what was the flirtation with the moon about? I suppose you had something to think over; something of a romantic kind, and so you took the moon into your confidence. Will you pay me a similar compliment?"

"As how?" he asked.

"Will you tell me what you were thinking about, I mean? Or must I tell you? Which is it to be?"

"You tell me, if you can."

"I can guess, I am sure. You were thinking of Gertrude Blessington."

He knew that she would say so, and therefore he was prepared for her conjecture being right.

“I was thinking of her among other things, but certainly not of her principally,” he replied, quietly.

“Tell me!” she said. “Have you quite made up your mind to marry her?”

He laughed merrily.

“Have I made up my mind to go to the moon? I could not do that, if I made up my mind ever so. And I suspect I should have nearly as much difficulty in marrying Miss Blessington, even supposing that I wanted to do so.”

“And you really do not want?” she asked, with a seriousness that in her betokened considerable and genuine anxiety.

“No!” he answered, firmly, “I do not.”

His answer was sufficiently true, or at least he considered it so, as a reply to a question too blunt to be evaded by an indirect response. His companion showed, by the sudden change of her face from grave to gay, that she thoroughly believed him. How often honest men deceive unscrupulous women!

“She is very lovely, I must confess.” Carryngton had never heard her own as much about Beauty Blessington before. Perhaps it was easier to say so now that he had made the above frank statement of his intentions. “Very lovely, indeed. None of the new faces are equal to hers; at least, none that I have seen. And you really—really have no idea of marrying her?”

“None whatsoever, I assure you.”

His companion continued her praises of the young lady, whom she had certainly never before praised at all. And not content with lauding her merits, she contrasted them with the merits of other well-known town belles who were supposed to be Miss Blessington's rivals. If Percy Carryngton was not moved by her charms to want to make her his wife, it was not bad policy to point out how very much superior she was to half-a-dozen others about whom he had not yet made the same declaration. I do not think he saw the motive for all this new glorification of Gertrude; but I am

quite sure that Mrs. Underhill did not guess how exceedingly agreeable it was to him.

"None of them are fit to hold a candle to her, I think," she continued; "and I am not astonished that you should admire her. But though I have not been able to help thinking now and then that you more than admired her, I never could really bring myself to believe that you, at your age, could be so foolish as to want to marry her or anybody."

"Why not?" he asked, laughingly. "I do not want to do so, it is true. But if I did, where would be the folly?"

"Why, everywhere. Why should you give up your liberty for anybody? No woman in the world is worth it. Of course every woman, or nearly every woman, would enslave you, if she could. It is our nature. But you are surely much too wise for that. Much better for you to be petted by as many as ever you like, than to be monopolized by one."

"But who pets me? Nobody that I know of."

"You are ungrateful. I have no doubt that heaps of women do, though you are too generous to tell me. I mean they like you, and make a deal of you, and spoil you——"

"And buy flowers for me——"

"Yes; and buy flowers for you, and are foolish about you generally."

"But I tell you that nobody is so."

"Very well, then; if you will have it so," she said, impatiently but gaily. "*I* am the only one who does so, if you like. But if *I* did not, somebody else would. It is only because you cannot be in two places at once. But if you were married, you would always have to be in the same place. Oh! if I were a man, a man of any sort, I would never marry! But you! you in your best youth—now, I am not going to enumerate your virtues; but you, such as you are and know yourself to be—for you to marry would be like committing suicide."

“Then console yourself that I am not going to perish yet a bit; at least by self-destruction.”

They rose and returned to the room where she had found him on first coming downstairs. Whether it was that her spirits always rose as the morning went on, or whether they had this morning received an exceptional impetus, it is certain that she was in the gayest temper and the most agreeable of all her moods. To tell the truth, when the two were left alone for very long, she generally ended by getting a little petulant, just enough so for him to see but never to be able to comment upon. He feared he knew the reason, though he never liked to own the belief wholly, even to himself. To-day he was delighted to find that the longer they were together, the happier she grew.

It was at a little inn in the Austrian Tyrol that Atwell Underhill and Percy Carryngton had first met. The latter was still a boy under age, and the former was

having that experience of the Continent which has been before alluded to, and of which he grew so speedily tired. After spending three or four days together at the inn, Underhill asked the young fellow to join him in a mountain expedition whose arduousness had fired his roving spirit. Percy had answered that he should have been very glad to go, but frankly owned that he could not afford to do so. The expedition would have cost fifteen or twenty pounds, and his pocket-money in those days was of very moderate proportions.

“ Oh, I'll pay the shot ! ” had been Atwell's reply. “ Never you trouble yourself about that, youngster. I've got plenty, and shall be delighted to have you as a companion. You're worth your talk.”

At nineteen such offers are not unoften made to us, and they can nearly always be unhesitatingly accepted. And so, without more ado, the two started on their expedition. It was a long and a pleasant one,

and at the end of it, the elder man wanted the younger to go still further with him on the same terms. But this Percy said he could not do. He must join his father, who was then still alive, at Verona.

“All right, my boy!” said Major Carryngton when Percy came to him with his story, and explained the cause of his absence. “I think it’s a pity you did not accept the second offer as well as the first. Young fellows of your age cannot see too much of the world; and I only wish I could afford to send you to see more of it.”

The two travellers never met again till about three months back from where we now are in our story, and the place of meeting was the London Bridge Station. They had time at the moment for little more than just to recognise each other, exchange addresses, and promise, as the phrase is, to look one another up. Carryngton looked up Underhill the very next day.

Nearly nine years had elapsed since they

had parted; but Percy had never forgotten the man who had been so kind to him in the Tyrol, and he was delighted at the idea of renewing an acquaintance in connexion with which he had none but pleasant reminiscences. But the real relative distance between nineteen and twenty-six, their then respective, and twenty-eight and thirty-five, their now respective ages, is very different. Then, there was a man and there was a boy. Now, there were two men.

Nor was this the only change. Underhill meanwhile had come to great grief. Carryngton, during the same period, had arrived at happy fortunes. They told each other the story of their lives since the good-bye by the Tyrolese trout-stream, and then shook hands again as a renewal and pledge of cordiality.

But the most important change was yet to tell, and Underhill forthwith told it.

“I’m married, you must know.”

“Married! You don’t say so? How long have you been so?”

“Just eighteen months. You’ll come and see us, wont you?”

“Of course I will, and that very shortly, you may be sure.”

He went a couple of days after, and found a very lovely woman. He liked her at first sight, and she liked him. Atwell seemed delighted that Percy Carryngton, Lord Rendover’s cousin, and now a young swell about town, should take so quickly and unmistakably to his wife, who was already in anything but the good graces of what Atwell called his “confounded relations.” At the same time it became perfectly clear that the two men were going to be really fast friends. The remembrance in one of kindness conferred, and in the other of having conferred it, made a good starting-point for a renewed and steady friendship.

We do not readily abandon our first impressions. Perhaps our partiality in favour of the soundness of our own judgment does not permit us. Carryngton was not a very

lenient judge of women, but their good looks warped his observation, and invariably biassed him at first into over-estimating their merits. But he was not long in noticing many things in and about Mrs. Underhill that even prejudice could not approve. Indeed there was much which, all partiality despite, he was obliged to condemn.

He was at Jessamine Lodge constantly, and yet he met very few women there, and none of them often. He took this fact, even standing alone, as a bad sign. But when coupled with other facts, it was more than a bad sign. There were plenty of men there; none of them being of a good style, and nearly all of them on a footing of conversational familiarity with the hostess exceedingly objectionable.

It was perfectly true that Atwell liked men's society, and that particular form of it which is not the most desirable for women, nor the most agreeable to women who are strictly what every sensible man and woman would wish to see them. Yet had there

been other women occasionally in the house of different tastes and temper from the beautiful hostess, Atwell's easy-going preferences would not have been of so much consequence. Himself the most loyal and unsuspecting of God's creatures, he thought his visitors right down jolly fellows, very different from his “stuck-up, confounded relations.” True, he would have liked to see more women in the house. But then his male friends were nearly all unmarried men. And besides, as to whether women should or should not be often in the house, everybody can understand that it was not the husband who had the ordering of that.

It may perhaps be doubted if Percy Carryngton could have long put up with most of the men who were admitted to Jessamine Lodge, and still less with their being on such easy terms with its mistress. That she should be known among them as “Lady Godiva,” and “Casta Diva,” was bad enough. To Carryngton the joke was to the last degree offensive. It was not in

itself a fortunate name: and one is almost led to suspect that it was given under the influence of an ignorance very similar to that which prompted an ardent but unlettered republican to wish to call one of his daughters "Respublica." He was saved from the blunder by the intervention at the font of the clergyman, who happened to be a classic. No one, however, had interfered to save Mrs. Underhill from being called Godiva: a most honourable name, Heaven knows, but one which suffers from the disadvantage of being capable of being turned into unpleasant fun by the sacrilegious. Atwell's male set were not very reverential, and his wife accordingly was the subject of their wit.

Carryngton "damned their impudence" to himself, and showed his distaste for them and their ways so plainly that, amongst themselves, they "damned his impudence" in turn. It soon became perfectly clear that they would be seen very little henceforth at Jessamine Lodge, or that he would.

To no one did this become clear so soon as to Mrs. Underhill herself, and she quickly made up her mind who should go and who should stay. Besides, the fact that Percy Carryngton was a more recent comer, and therefore more of a novelty, she really liked him and cared for him, whilst she cared merely for their admiration and the amount of excitement and amusement she got out of them, and not for themselves at all. He was handsomer, richer, more fashionable, a grander attendant, in fact. Accordingly, she made a very clean sweep of the men he evidently disliked, and left him master of the position.

Atwell had seen so many men come and go, so many blow hot and cold, so many fellows show themselves for a time at Jessamine Lodge every second day, and then disappear entirely, that he took the departure of these others very quietly. Of course they did not leave him altogether. But they came much seldomer, and when they did come, they smoked with him more

than they talked with his wife. The change was not disagreeable. He, too, liked Carryngton more than all of them put together; and the only fault he ever had to find with him was that he did not come often enough.

This morning especially, ever since she had wrung from him the plain avowal that he was not thinking of marrying Gertrude Blessington, Mrs. Underhill had seemed thoroughly content both with herself and him. When in this mood, she was marvelously agreeable. At least he always found her so. She was his friend's wife, and therefore—let her faults be what they might—his friend. And then she was so immensely lovely. Just look at her!

"Please, ma'am, there's a carriage at the gate," said Mary, suddenly entering; "and the people are coming in; I thought you would like to know, as it's so early."

"Who can it be? What time is it?"

"Only a little after half-past twelve," said Carryngton.

"It must be some of Atwell's people. I half expected them yesterday, as I told you, and to bring some flowers. Nobody else would think of calling so early.. It's probably Atwell's step-mother."

"But there are two ladies, ma'am," said Mary; "and that's them ringing."

Mrs. Underhill hurried upstairs, and Carryngton took refuge in Atwell's smoking room, where he had to regale himself with the last number of *Bell's Life*.

CHAPTER XIII.

DEFYING THE ENEMY.

GODIVA UNDERHILL's conjecture was correct. One of the visitors was Atwell's step-mother, his father having married a second time some years ago. Her companion, the other visitor, was the Honourable Mrs. Grantley Morris, a young and decidedly pretty bride, daughter of Lord Brakecliffe, and the most aristocratic by birth of any of the wives that Underhill, Morris, and Underhill had managed to win for themselves. She happened to be staying with Mrs. Underhill at Baxtreth Park, Atwell's father's place, about eight miles from town, and she had come up to London with her hostess to-day; both of the ladies wanting to do some shopping.

“You had better come in with me, Guinivere. She’s worth seeing, I assure you; and you will then be able to judge if all that I have told you and you have heard from the rest be true or not.”

So in both ladies went, and were ushered by Mary into the room which Mrs. Atwell Underhill and Carryngton had just left vacant.

“I furnished the whole of it for them, my dear,” said the elder lady. “That is, I mean, I chose and ordered everything and saw to the house being got ready for them. Atwell’s father, of course, paid for it. Was it not good of him?”

“Very,” said Guinivere Morris, who was pretty well informed of poor Atwell’s fast doings, but had not received an account of them from very favourable historians.

“And is not everything exceedingly nice and pretty? Of course there is nothing really valuable, and everything is on a small scale; but it really is all perfectly nice, is it not?”

"Not only nice, but really charming. I do not see what more anybody could desire."

Mrs. Morris, as the daughter of a peer, and as it happened, a poor one, was more accustomed to the outward signs of moderate competence, and even of poverty, than anybody could be who, like Mrs. Underhill, moved only among the third or fourth generation of money-getting people. Lord Brakecliffe's child had near relations of her own whose homes were not comparable in pretension to this one, though her own, now that she belonged to Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, was most magnificent.

"But what abomination is this?" said Mrs. Underhill, putting up her eyeglass, and closely scrutinizing something on the mantelpiece. "Look here, my dear. Or perhaps you had better not, for it certainly is not fit to be looked at. But I forget you are married now, and it does not matter. You might as well see it; it will give you an idea of Mrs. Atwell's notions of decency."

The "abomination" which Guinivere Morris was asked to inspect was a statuette in plaster of Paris, which could certainly never have been conceived save on the banks of the Seine, though thousands of casts by this time adorn brackets in the drawing-rooms of a tolerant and progressive age. Suffice it to say that it was of that order of art which its patrons call realistic; as though the two words were not mutually destructive!

Pretty fair little Mrs. Morris looked at it and turned away.

"I don't think it is very nice," she said, quietly.

"Nice! It is nasty, filthy, abominable. It is too bad, after all the trouble I took and all the weeks I spent in making the house look what it ought to do, that such things as that should be brought and put into it, not only to spoil it, but to make it unfit for a decent person to come into. Of course everybody knows that I had the furnishing of the house, and how can I tell

that these objectionable French trumpery ornaments will not be ascribed to my choosing?"

"I don't think people will make that mistake," said Mrs. Morris.

"How can I be sure of that? Just look round the room! Do you see that picture, and that group over there? The room is full of such things. Atwell ought to be ashamed of himself to permit it. But he has led such a life, he knows no better; and he is so infatuated about his wife, he thinks her the loveliest creature in the universe, and that she can do no wrong."

How long this novercal invective would have gone on, it is difficult to say. But as the last words were uttered, the door opened and Mrs. Atwell Underhill entered.

Although she had declared to Percy Car-ryngton at breakfast that she had hurried her toilet in order not to keep him waiting, and that therefore she was not half-dressed, she had made no visible change in her

costume during the ten minutes that she had kept her visitors waiting. She came in, radiant with smiles, as though she were highly delighted to see Mrs. Underhill. There were no signs of hostility or defiance in her manner, unless—as I believe is sometimes the case among women—excessive gaiety and high spirits are to be considered such.

“Let me introduce you to Mrs. Morris,” said Mrs. Underhill, as soon as she had greeted her stepdaughter-in-law.

When women have resolved upon an offensive engagement, they are never long in commencing the action. This was blow number one. Godiva, as the older married woman and also by reason of being in her own house, was entitled to have Mrs. Morris presented to her, instead of her being presented to Mrs. Morris. Mrs. Underhill could not have been dead to this law of the Medes and Persians. But then she wished to impress upon Godiva that, as Atwell’s wife, she shared his permanent disgrace and inferiority, and also that Mrs.

Morris was Lord Brakecliffe's daughter, whilst she was only—what she was.

Nevertheless it was not a blow, however serious and intentional, that could there and then be met by another. Accordingly Godiva appeared not to notice it, but held out her hand to the bride and assured her how glad she was to make her acquaintance.

This was all the more good-natured of her, inasmuch as she and Atwell had not been invited to the wedding-breakfast, although it had been on an enormous scale and nearly every other Underhill under the sun had been asked to Lord Brakecliffe's. Of course, therefore, Atwell and his wife had not called on Mr. and Mrs. Grantley Morris. All the more presumptuous might it have been considered on the part of Guinivere to come to Jessamine Lodge, even under Mrs. Underhill's wing. Mrs. Morris had pointed out the objection, but the worthy step-mother had overruled it.

"Oh, never mind that, my dear. You must not stand on ceremony with them,

you know. It's only Atwell. They ought to be very glad to get anybody to see them, in any way they can. And you cannot stay in the carriage all the time, at the gate. That would be worse still. Besides, I want to lunch there. We shall not be home again before five o'clock, and we cannot be all that time without something to eat. You *must* come."

Guinivere was one of the kindest little creatures in the world. She made no further demur, and now found herself in the presence of the woman of whom she had lately heard so much. She returned Godiva's pressure of the hand with equal cordiality, and perhaps with greater sincerity.

"I have brought you some flowers from Baxtreth," said Mrs. Underhill, "thinking they might be welcome, but——"

"Oh! thank you very, very much. They are exceedingly welcome. Where are they?" And Godiva looked as grateful as she said she was.

"In the hall, very likely. John brought them in, I suppose. But I see you have some already." A vase full of them was standing on an occasional table near the window. "And very handsome ones too. I did not imagine you would have them at this time of the year, as you have no hot-house."

"But somebody might have made a present of them to Mrs. Atwell," said Guinivere, kindly, "just as we have brought our big bunch from the country."

"People do such things now and then," said Godiva, gaily. She did not care to avail herself further of the retort, seeing that the flowers in question had not been given to her. She preferred to rush boldly at the position which Mrs. Underhill had set as a trap.

"But these were not a present," she continued. "I bought them; bought them at Covent Garden yesterday."

"They must be very dear as yet," said the mother-in-law, a little amazed at

Godiva's audacity in calmly acknowledging her extravagance. What would she have said if she had seen the floral display upstairs in Carryngton's bedroom!

"Perhaps they are," Godiva replied. "But I am so fond of flowers. I cannot bear to see a room without them. Besides, we were expecting Mr. Carryngton—Lord Rendover's cousin, you know, Mrs. Morris——"

"It's a very distant cousinship," interrupted Mrs. Underhill, outraged at Godiva's familiarity with the Peerage both in the abstract and in the concrete.

"Is it?" said Godiva, innocently; "I daresay it is. I never know anything about people's exact relationship. But they always call each other cousin, and are on the closest possible terms. Indeed Mr. Carryngton had been dining with Lord Rendover yesterday evening before coming up here. Do you know him, Mrs. Morris?"

"Slightly. I have met him at papa's, and once or twice elsewhere."

"Is he not charming? He is everything that a man ought to be, I think."

"I thought him very agreeable and gentlemanly," answered Mrs. Morris; "and I have always heard him highly spoken of by everybody."

"He is delightful. And he is so particular, and so critical, and so accustomed to everything luxurious, that I could not resist getting some flowers; even though, as Mrs. Underhill says, they are rather dear. I wonder he does not come down."

"Who?" asked the elder lady, wonderingly.

"Mr. Carryington, of whom we have been speaking."

"Is he here?" she asked again, with still more astonishment in the intonation of her voice.

"Yes. He slept here last night; he often does. I will send for him." And she rang the bell. "He probably does not know who it is that has called, or he would have come in before. Mary," she said to the servant, who appeared in answer to the

summons of the bell, "will you tell Mr. Carryngton that Mrs. Underhill and Mrs. Grantley Morris are here? He will probably be in your master's smoking-room."

Carryngton was still there, though he had long since disposed of *Bell's Life*, and was leaning out of window. He had remained there purposely, and was a little surprised when he received Godiva's message. He had thought he was better out of the way. However, there was nothing for it but to go down.

"I believe she does not care a snap for them all," he said to himself, as he descended. "Irreverent, daring creature that she is. She has no more veneration for Underhill, Morris, and Underhill than for the Catechism. I don't think this will do Atwell any good. But what can I do?"

He went in and paid his respects to the visitors, both of whom were known to him. He had met Mrs. Grantley Morris, as she had told Godiva, two or three times, and liked what he had seen of her very much. His attention was therefore at first chiefly di-

rected to her, whilst Mrs. Underhill, who was suffering from the damaging defeat she had sustained about him and about the flowers, was obliged to talk to her daughter-in-law.

This, however, was not a state of things at all in conformity with the wishes and views of the hostess, who accordingly very soon interfered with it. With cheerful and happy audacity, she broke into the lines of the other two, and very soon carried him off, forcing Mrs. Underhill to fall back upon and close up with unwarlike Guinivere, who barely understood the nature and motive of this piece of strategy.

Mrs. Underhill understood it well enough, and so did Carryngton. But though he disapproved it, as calculated ulteriorly to damage Atwell's and therefore Godiva's interests, he felt himself—what man would not have felt himself?—quite unequal to preventing it. She had got hold of him and she kept him; airing him and her affectionate familiarity with him for the benefit of her two guests, with delightful

and outrageous effrontery. This was her answer to Mrs. Underhill's impertinence about the flowers, and for introducing her to Mrs. Morris. She was too fine a tactician to increase the effect of an enemy's blow by seeming to feel it. She preferred to receive it as though it had never been struck at all, and then to deal good, gaily-aimed vengeance for it later, and in a way that could not possibly be construed into retaliation.

"Mrs. Underhill has been admiring my flowers, Mr. Carryngton."

"Yes, are they not beautiful?" said Mrs. Morris.

"But if they could only see the ones I put in your room upstairs, they would think nothing of these."

"Whatever does she drag that in for?" thought Carryngton to himself, quite at a loss what to say aloud. Mrs. Underhill was astounded, high as was her opinion of her daughter-in-law's bravery. Even Guinivere was a little taken aback, and in her con-

fusion happily gave a new turn to the conversation.

"I think you know Miss Blessington, do you not, Mr. Carryngton?"

"Yes, I am glad to say I do. Beauty Blessington, I am told, the world is beginning to call her."

"And she quite deserves it," said the elder Mrs. Underhill. "She is by far the most beautiful young woman I ever saw."

Mrs. Underhill did not think anything of the kind; but it gave her an opportunity of saying, in a polite way, in Godiva's presence, that Beauty Blessington was by far more beautiful than she was.

"That is very high praise," said Carryngton, at once chivalrously but cautiously. "But she is certainly exceedingly lovely."

"She is a great friend of mine," said Guinivere. "Indeed she is my greatest friend. I like her immensely. And she is so clever."

"I should suppose so," said Carryngton. "She has what is rarely met with in either

man or woman, an intelligence both imaginative and critical."

Godiva had remained silent and perfectly passive since Mrs. Underhill's last bit of hard but dexterous hitting, and the latter lady was congratulating herself upon having broken her enemy's centre. But female triumphs over Lady Godiva were never of long duration. She was biding her time; and now she brought up her reserve, and closed round the rash assailant with both her wings and struck for final victory.

"She was at the theatre last night," she began, quietly. "At the Pall Mall."

"Were you there?" asked Mrs. Morris.

"Oh yes! We always go when there is a new piece. We always get boxes sent to us, and we are so fond of the play."

"I thought you said," broke in Mrs. Underhill, wishing to catch Godiva tripping in her statement of facts, "that Mr. Carryngton spent the evening with you?"

"So he did. He spent it in our box."

"But I thought you said he dined with Lord Rendover."

"I dined with my cousin first——"

Here was Fortune favouring the brave in a wonderful manner. Carryngton was quite innocently talking of Lord Rendover as his cousin, very shortly after Mrs. Underhill, before his entrance into the room, had challenged Godiva's correctness in talking of the two men as cousins.

"I dined with my cousin first," he said ;
"and went to Atwell's box afterwards."

"And whilst there," said Godiva, for whom the supreme and decisive moment had come — "whilst there, he caught sight of Miss Blessington, and went to pay his respects. I naturally thought that I should see nothing more of him, and that this surpassing beauty would keep him a prisoner for the rest of the evening. But, to my surprise, he returned in about a quarter of an hour, and remained with me till the end of the play, when Atwell and I brought him

home. Is not that what happened?" she asked, turning gaily to him.

"Precisely. You are a most faithful historian."

"I think we must be going, my dear," said Mrs. Underhill to her young companion. "We have so much shopping to do."

"Good-bye, and come again soon, do!" said Godiva to her mother-in-law, as they parted at the door. "And thanks so much for the flowers!"

"I thought you were going to stay for lunch?" said Mrs. Morris, innocently, when the two ladies were seated in the carriage, and were driving away. "I am getting quite hungry."

"Stay for lunch! How could we stay? I am sorry I ever took you there. Anything like that creature's insolence I never met with. It is not a fit house for any decent woman to enter. As for Percy Carryngton—why, young men will be young men, and they are so easily duped and

led astray. But for her to have him about the house in that way, and to parade him in the unblushing way in which she does, it's downright impropriety. As for Atwell, I shall take the earliest opportunity of telling his father what I think of it; for speaking to Atwell himself is no use at all. He simply insults me when I remonstrate with him."

Mrs. Morris might have made some deprecatory remarks, but she had too much good sense to do so. She contented herself, at the earliest opportunity, of repeating that she was beginning to feel very much in want of something to eat.

"We will get something to eat in town, my dear. But I would sooner have died of hunger than have stayed in that house any longer this morning. A brazen-faced creature! Did you ever see such a costume in your life? And with a strange man in the house too!"

And Mrs. Underhill shook and settled her own spotless silk dress, as if to rid it of

whatever contamination it must necessarily have recently suffered. Even good-natured, pretty, easy-going Guinivere wished the old lady would sit still a little.

How far Atwell Underhill had improved his prospects by marrying, the reader is now in a better position for judging. He was, as we already know, three-and-thirty, with a salary of five hundred a year, when he took it into his head that he would like to do so.

There were more reasons than one to urge him to the step. In the first place, he found home and home belongings quite as stupid as he had found them twelve years back. And besides finding them still quite as stupid, he found them now still more intolerable, by reason of the inferiority which, despite the way he was making everywhere with Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, he was ever and anon made to feel.

In the next place, hard living and hard travelling, late sitting-up of nights, and exposure to all climates and all weathers, had somewhat shattered his constitution. They

had not done so visibly. But he himself felt their effects. And when a man of thirty-three has seen a good deal of life, and feels rather the worse in his bones for having seen it, he begins to incline towards marriage. Not to put it too strongly, he is more prepared to marry somebody or other than he would have been prepared to marry the same somebody or other a few years previously. This was Atwell's case. He pined for liberty. Yet he knew that if it were once more fully restored to him, he could not use it as he had used it once already. He had not the stamina for it. If he got away from his home again it would be to enter another, more exclusively his own.

And then, in the last place, whilst in this frame of mind, he met and fell in love with Godiva Underhill.

She was not of that world in which Underhill, Morris, and Underhill was a mighty power. Indeed, she was quite out of it. Who was she, and what were her

people? Where is the use of inquiring? They were nobody, and everybody knows what that means.

Had they been somebody, and with such a lovely creature as Godiva for their daughter, what do you suppose would have been Atwell's chance of marrying her? Clearly none at all. How could a fellow with a salary of five hundred a year hope to marry any girl with whom Underhill, Morris, and Underhill's way of looking at things was law?

Atwell meekly submitted his wishes to his people, and urged all the arguments that he could think of in their favour. He was, as we have said, in decent odour with them at the moment, in consequence of his three years' assiduous attention to business, and his general good nature and amiability. His project was therefore taken into consideration.

Why should he not marry? Poor fellow, he was three-and-thirty, and had really been behaving remarkably well of late. If

there still lingered in him the smallest inclination to kick over the traces, matrimony would act as the final means of making him go steadily in harness.

The girl's people were not much, but then they were not very numerous, and there was nothing absolutely against them. And if Atwell was to be allowed to marry at all just yet, his very comparative pennilessness would compel him to marry a little out of the Underhill, Morris, and Underhill set. Five hundred a year was a small sum to marry on. What did they all say to raising it to seven? If the firm did that, what would his father do for him?

His father would furnish his house for him, and would put down a thousand pounds for the purpose. He was quite willing that his son should marry if the firm would really decide to give him the talked-of seven hundred a year. This they did, and the marriage took place. The wedding was a very quiet one, but wedding there was, and the new couple entered

Jessamine Lodge within four months of Atwell's first mention of his wishes.

The matter had been made very easy to him, and it now seemed as if all was plain sailing; but in a very short time he had lost nearly if not entirely all the domestic and, so to speak, unofficial favour with the family at large—meaning, by the family, the Morrisises and Underhills, and all their numerous ramifications—which he had lately won from them by his kindliness and geniality of temper.

We know what view he himself took of this change. He expressed himself fully to Percy Carryngton on the subject, and what he said has been fully reported. He considered that all the women of the set were jealous of his wife on account of her beauty, and had contrived to set the elder men against her and to overawe the younger ones from seeming to countenance her. And when Percy Carryngton had demurred to this notion, he had laughed at his friend for his naïve simplicity.

Yet, which of the two was right? I think that Carryngton was. Women are rarely if ever jealous of other women, merely on account of superior beauty. There never was a more stupid slander than the assertion to the contrary. Girls like girls for being beautiful, like them all the better for it, make more of them, and overlook many faults in them in consequence. They are more foolish about female beauty than men are, and that is saying a good deal.

But what they do not like, and will not put up with, is that a lovely woman should make use of her loveliness as a weapon of offence against the rest of her sex. Then they close up and show a serried form against the common enemy.

Do men act differently? Men hail the advent of a superiorly clever fellow and are ready to pay him the homage which is his due. But if he intemperately avail himself of his superiority to outrage or insult them, they combine their strength in order to protect their individual weakness,

and with corporate might they hurl the arrogant despot from power.

How far this is applicable to Godiva Underhill, the reader must judge. The Underhill and the Morris women had received her at first with every sign of welcome, and it seemed as if her beauty, of which they were never tired of talking, was going to carry all before it, and to make her and Atwell equal among equals. But very shortly the face of things waxed different. Some said that she had been the cause of Bingham Morris's quarrel with his sister Kate, and others went so far as to say that it was all through her that Harry Underhill's engagement with poor little Rosie Sing was broken off. At any rate, we all know how matters stood now that Atwell had been married for nearly a couple of years. He still had his salary of seven hundred a year. It had not been raised, and there was no talk of making him a partner.

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